

Think Piece – Education for sustainable development

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Content

- Introduction, p1
- What is education for sustainable development (ESD)? p1
- How does the teaching of geography link with ESD? p2
- What teaching and learning approaches best support ESD? p2
- Recent government initiatives (2008), p3
- What qualities do new geography teachers need to develop in order to provide effective ESD in school geography? p4
- Bibliography, p4
- Further teaching ideas , p5
- Journal abstracts, p5

This paper is adapted from one of the 'Think Pieces' written as part of the GA's GTIP project with the Teacher Development Agency in 2008/9. The project intention was to develop geography materials for PGCE courses, to inform and to encourage reflection on a range of themes and issues in geography education. In this Think Piece, Maggie Smith, who was then at the Open University, indicates how you can ensure ESD forms an integral part of your delivery in the geography classroom. It is written in the context of the 1999 and 2007 National Curriculum.

Introduction

Achieving sustainable development is a fundamental challenge facing all societies in the 21st century. Recent commitments at national and international levels, such as the declaration by the United Nations of the period 2005-14 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, have put a spotlight on education for sustainable development (ESD). They also provide a major stimulus and opportunity to integrate it into education strategies and action plans. The key questions that should be considered for teaching ESD are:

- What is education for sustainable development?
- How does the teaching of geography link with ESD?
- What teaching and learning approaches best support ESD?
- What qualities do new teachers need to develop in order to provide effective ESD in school geography?

What is education for sustainable development (ESD)?

The term sustainable development grew out of the work of the United Nations – particularly the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) set up in 1983. The WCED report *Our Common Future* (1987) defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Agenda 21, which arose from the Rio Convention in 1992, created the link between education and sustainable development.

However, the concepts and definitions of 'sustainability', 'sustainable development' and 'education for sustainable development' are complex and contested. There is a wealth of literature setting out a range of interpretations. It is important for new teachers to interrogate the rhetoric of ESD, appreciate the

range of views and political perspectives, and reflect on their own experience, ideas, values and attitudes to clarify their own views.

A starting point for an exploration of viewpoints could include John Huckle's (1983) discussion of environmental ideologies. Stephen Sterling (2001) and William Scott and Stephen Gough (2003) explore, in different ways, the relationship between learning and sustainable development. Other aspects of ESD are given by:

- David Hicks (2001), who demonstrates the link between ESD, citizenship and a futures perspective
- Daniella Tilbury (1997), who emphasises the need for teaching values for sustainable living
- John Morgan (2000), who argues for a social and political perspective to teaching for a sustainable society.

In addition, the UNESCO website offers information on the background, concepts and objectives of ESD. The report of the Panel for Education for Sustainable Development (1998) sets out seven principles of ESD and links them to learning outcomes.

How does the teaching of geography link with ESD?

'Geography enables well-informed judgements about environments and supports an understanding of sustainable development' (GA position statement 2003).

That geography can make a major contribution to ESD in the school curriculum is not in doubt, as the GA's position statement and many of the texts listed above make clear. The 1999 geography national curriculum contained a requirement to explore the idea of sustainable development and recognised its implications for people, places and environments and for students' own lives. The 2007 Geography National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 highlighted 'Environmental interaction and sustainable development' as one of the seven key concepts for the subject. This involved an exploration of sustainable development and its impact and an understanding of the dynamic inter-relationships and tensions between physical and human geographies.

The 2007 secondary curriculum also promoted a number of (non-statutory) cross-curricular dimensions, which include the global dimension and sustainable development. It was intended that these cross-curricular dimensions would be built into the wider curriculum in order to providing opportunities for young people to '...make sense of the world...' and to provide '...real and compelling contexts...' for developing cross-curricular skills such as literacy and thinking. (QCA 2007)

What teaching and learning approaches best support ESD?

Many teaching and learning strategies already used in school geography encourage effective ESD. These include approaches that:

- are learner centred
- develop autonomous and critical thinking
- develop skills of enquiry, creativity, imagination, and collective decision making
- use a range of text and media resources.

These all contribute to the ability of students to envision the sort of future that they want for themselves and for society.

However, there are persuasive arguments that suggest we need to go further than this. We have already noted John Morgan's (2000) argument for incorporating sociology and politics into ESD and Stephen Sterling's (2001), which urges a paradigm shift from transmissive to transformative learning so that students can see different ways of taking action.

David Lambert and David Balderstone (2000) note that effective ESD implies technically challenging teaching, requiring teachers to get students to participate in a culture of argument, in which they take an active participatory role in coming to group and individual responses to questions. David Job, Clare Day and Tony Smyth (1999) comment on the fact that ESD frequently raises issues and problems that seem beyond our control, leading some students to feel anxious or insecure about the future. They suggest that fieldwork in the local community can help counteract this by encouraging students to look critically at their everyday lives and surroundings – and look at ways of articulating their concerns.

Alun Morgan (2006) explores the futures orientation of sustainable development, arguing that, as yet, we do not have a vision of what a sustainable society will require and so we need to educate students to think positively about their future role and actions.

Recent government initiatives (2008)

In response to the UK Government's sustainable development strategy 'Securing the Future' (2005), the Department for Education and Skills have produced a sustainable development action plan, a key strand of which is for all schools to become models of sustainable development for their communities.

To help schools achieve this, a Sustainable Schools Framework was launched in 2007. The framework, which is supported by a sustainable schools web service and a school self-evaluation tool linked to Ofsted's self-evaluation headings, features eight 'doorways':

Environmental action:

- food and drink
- energy
- water
- purchasing and waste
- buildings and grounds

Social action:

- inclusion and participation
- local well-being (local citizenship)
- the global dimension (global citizenship).

These actions can have learning benefits (fitter, more alert pupils), and economic benefits (lower bills for utilities), and the good practice demonstrated in schools can spread via parents, school suppliers and through the local community.

Schools are encouraged to draw these activities together, highlight opportunities for school improvement, and link them to other agendas such as 'Every Child Matters' (for instance by giving pupils the opportunity to act positively to shape society and their own future).

What qualities do new geography teachers need to develop in order to provide effective ESD in school geography?

The above discussion suggests that new teachers can be most effective in teaching about and for ESD in geography when they:

- can investigate and interrogate the discourse of ESD
- have developed a critical and holistic understanding of ESD
- have reflected on and analysed their own views of ESD
- can apply this understanding to planning, using and evaluating classroom materials (which meet curriculum requirements) in ESD
- are prepared to rethink ways of teaching geography that take account of complex social and political issues
- can move from promoting transmissive learning to promoting critical and creative transformative learning and are equipped to:
 - tackle difficult, controversial issues where there are a range of alternative answers
 - deal with the anxiety that might arise in students from the studying of these issues.

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Further teaching ideas

Unesco's Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future is a free multi-media teacher education programme that contains information and ideas for teacher educators and teachers.

The GA's *Teaching Geography* journal regularly provides teaching ideas for delivering ESD within geography, examples include:

2001: April – Special focus on 'Teaching and learning about citizenship and sustainable development', and October – 'Citizenship and sustainable development through geography' (Smyth) and 'The CLIMATE conservation project' (Murray)
 2002: January – 'Sustainable tourism in the Peruvian tropical forest' (Newman), April – 'Putting your foot in it' (Heath), July – 'Sustainable development and the curriculum 2000' (Wade) and 'Investigating sustainability while maximising student use of ICT' (Treanor)
 2003: January – 'An environmental audit' (Bartlett) and 'Interpreting the Eden Project' (Ross), July – 'The Green Variety Show 2003' (Smith, Sugden and Walker), October – 'An environmental challenge for gifted and talented students' (Craven and Best), 'Empowering students with futures geography' (Johnston) and 'A greener future for farming' (Graham)
 2004: January – 'Different but equal: global citizenship post 16' (Storey)
 2006: Spring – 'Plastic bags: A sustainable change?' (S Waddington), 'Kangaroo: Sustainable meat and leather or cute tourist icon?' (C Rawding)
 2007: Summer – 'Unsettling settlement' (A Willson)

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