

Death of the teacher, rise of the eco-pedagogue

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Abstract

Greta Thunberg, teen environmental activist, famously said on school and education ‘why should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future? And what is the point of learning facts when the most important facts clearly mean nothing to our society?’.¹ Thunberg’s speech at the 2018 UN Climate Conference highlights the nascent cognisance that children around the world are coming to, questioning the content and purpose of the education they are receiving. Thunberg touches upon the idea that education, in its current state, is inadequate as it is failing to address the cataclysmic consequences of the Anthropocene. The intent of this article is to investigate how systems of schooling and education can be transformed by embracing a form of eco-pedagogy. Eco-pedagogy encourages a total reformation in the global education system, requiring a metamorphosis of the role of the educator in the classroom and a transformation of education which focuses a shift to sustainable planetary justice.

Keywords: Anthropocene; UN SDGs; sustainability compass; eco-pedagogy; curriculum design

The paradox of education for sustainability and death of the teacher

Sustainability in education can currently come under many names – education for sustainability, education for sustainable development and climate change education, amongst others. These range not just in their names but also in their focus, methodology and levels of institutional commitment. A continual criticism of these is that they are either focused heavily on environmental causes and miss the social and economic complexities of sustainability, or that they do not go far enough in their efforts.² Eco-pedagogy differs from education for sustainability in that it focuses not just on sustainability practices and causes, but also challenges top-down, market-focused approaches that exist in our current society, and which contribute to planetary injustice. Sustainability in education is often an additional subject schools offer or is perhaps offered as a special event or programme during the school year, and this, according to Blake *et al.*, has been the error in sustainability education, where sustainability is seen as ‘just’ an environmental cause and therefore is ‘tacked’ on to learning.³ Instead, sustainability needs to be reframed to consider the range of concepts behind the

term, concepts which become the skeletal foundations of what education is, and what education is for, across the world. Sustainability from the point of view of eco-pedagogy is more than an environmental movement, it is a concept, goal, process and strategy aiming to become a catalyst to deconstruct neoliberal ideologies. Sustainability from the lens of eco-pedagogy comprises a trichotomy: economy, society and the environment. All three divisions work in tandem without jeopardising the needs of future generations. Schools have a great mobilisation power that can instil not just a focus on sustainability, but on a new cosmivision whereby predatory capitalistic principles which have led to the Anthropocene can be challenged and subverted.

In addition to the lack of successful confluence between sustainability in theory and praxis, there exists what I consider a paradox in the current methods of sustainability teaching. Education for sustainability (Efs) is aimed at empowering learners of all ages to gain knowledge, skills and understanding of sustainability. According to UNESCO, it must prepare students and learners of all ages to 'find solutions for the challenges of today and the future. Education should be transformative and allow us to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change our societies and care for the planet'.⁴ The vehicles for this process of preparation of learners would ideally be schools and teachers, and therein lies a pedagogical paradox.

Learners may indeed be engaged in learning in school programmes that focus on the various elements of sustainability, however without tools and pedagogy which empowers students, the effectiveness of studying sustainability is limited. Wildemeersch argues that Efs leads to a sense of stultification within the student, and this is a result of well-intentioned progressive-minded educators.⁵ This occurs as Efs builds disempowerment and dependency on the teacher, where they become the sole authoritarian voice of progressive knowledge and are responsible for imparting knowledge that they hold. This paradox then leads to the learner's ability to think critically being restricted by the teacher, who continues to be the owner of knowledge. If there is to be a transformation of education, then it must be spatial, pedagogical and theoretical. I contend that the classroom, with its four walls and systems of learning which are semantically associated within those spaces, with the teacher as owner of knowledge, limit learning experiences and self-reflection. This means that teachers, and traditional styles of teaching and teaching spaces, need to die a metaphorical death to allow learners to evolve into free, critical thinkers. The death of the teacher and all that is semantically connected with the role – authority, ownership, stultification, conservatism – upon dying, can transform into the critical pedagogue.

The critical pedagogue

The tenets of eco-pedagogy focus on the learner's right to inquire and become critical

in spaces of freedom, and therein lies the question of the role of the critical pedagogue in this scenario. Without uniformity of what sustainability in education looks like, it could be increasingly difficult to understand how to be an eco-pedagogical educator. Looking back to some of Freire's thoughts can enlighten us here. McLaren states that, for Freire, an educator was multi-faceted, 'border intellectual; social activist; critical researcher; a moral agent; radical philosopher; political revolutionary'.⁶ Freire argued that the teacher, if choosing to claim neutrality in the classroom, or perhaps stating that the role of the teacher in state and world affairs is to remain objective, is de facto choosing conservatism, as the education model itself is built on conservatism. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* highlighted the idea that the educator's role is in fact manifold.⁷ The educator becomes more than an agent of knowledge transference, moving to become a critical pedagogue who challenges the learner to think critically through real-life problem-posing. To teach students of sustainability in its holistic sense, educators must take on the role of critical pedagogues, modelling to students critical thinking and praxis. This is to say a transformation of teaching, where traditional teaching methods are placed firmly in the past, needs to take place. Placing learning around sustainability issues in the real world means students can navigate an unpredictable future the likes of which humanity has not seen before. A critical pedagogue is always political, and the critical pedagogue fights to deconstruct the formidable conservative hierarchy found in education which enables the continuation of ideological capitalistic practices that have caused the Anthropocene. Teacher training will play a pivotal role in the fruition of this as educators will need to train in the very skills students require, to model to students skills such as collaboration, flexibility, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork. These skills and the state of being a critical pedagogue are intertwined and inseparable.

Eco-pedagogical learning tools: Green School, Bali, a case study

The role of the critical pedagogue is vital in the process of transformation; however, the lack of consistent pedagogical tools that critical pedagogues can harness when exploring eco-pedagogy may be a feature in the lack of uptake and success in current Efs. This section of the article will explore my own experiences as an educator, and the curriculum of Green School, Bali and how it uses the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Sustainability Compass, shaping the learning that is happening in the school.⁸

Green School, Bali employs a curriculum based on wall-less, transdisciplinary, student-led learning, underscored by the SDGs. The school itself, set on the island of Bali in Indonesia, is constructed entirely from bamboo, with open classrooms and a flexible timetable in operation. Students are encouraged not only to engage in pre-

existing sustainability projects but also create original sustainability projects. Whilst they engage in their own projects in the school, educators design units of learning around SDGs for the everyday learning experiences of students.

The Sustainable Development Goals are 17 global goals (see Figure 1) which the UN developed to create a more sustainable future for the earth.

Figure 1: 17 Sustainable Development Goals - United Nations (2016)



These SDGs are interconnected and are meant to be guiding aims to assist a range of organisations and establishments to act on issues surrounding sustainability in its entirety. For eco-pedagogy and sustainability-based curriculums, the SDGs can be a clear, concise and easy-to-navigate tool to use in curriculum design and student-led learning. The SDGs are a powerful teaching tool as they cover a range of topics that need to be addressed if global sustainability in the three key areas of sustainability highlighted earlier are to be achieved. The range of topics shows learners, from a young age, the complexities and depth of what sustainability is, whilst remaining easy to understand. The SDGs can be a universal tool that eco-pedagogists can use to develop consistency across the globe, but also one that ensures a thorough and well-rounded understanding of sustainability for pedagogues and learners alike.

Educators at Green School also use the ‘sustainability compass’, a tool designed by a group of educators from around the world to help educational communities build in thinking and learning about sustainability in an easy-to-use way. The compass is shared not only with educators but with students too, to encourage students to apply the compass points to their day-to-day life. The four points of the compass, labelled after the traditional navigating compass of North, East, South and West, are used to approach

any given topic through a sustainably holistic lens, guiding the user to deconstruct a topic through analysing the elements of nature, environment, society and wellbeing associated with the topic. At Green School, the use of the sustainability compass is pedagogical as it is used to design and shape units of learning around the major principles of how an SDG is connected to nature, economy, society and wellbeing. This potentially enables students to gain a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of an SDG and engage in the topic in a manner in which all aspects of sustainability are covered.

The range of tools educators and learners are able to use become ways in which eco-pedagogy is used in a very real sense to shape all learning. The tools used create a sense of unification within the pedagogy of the school, whilst allowing for educators to embrace student direction and choice. This flexibility and understanding of learning as an organic process can be difficult to embrace as it is mostly not aligned with any governmental standards of learning, and this brings up thought about how much control and oversight governments should have over education.

Dangers and criticisms

It is somewhat utopian to discuss a transformation in teaching whilst not considering the very real obstacles in achieving this. The importance of creating a sustainable world is no less important than educating children, and to further complicate the matter, communities have their own opinion of what education means, and what it is for. Rowe argues that higher education should be at the forefront of education for sustainability, however in this current epoch of education the role governments play in sustainability education, and the emphasis on state standards, will always take precedence.⁹ The geopolitical complexities of eco-pedagogy are not to be underestimated. Eco-pedagogy aims to deconstruct capitalist ideologies and legitimise the importance of centring learning on sustainability. This process of deconstruction and legitimisation is a dangerous one, where educators and educational establishments who do want to engage in the transformation of education and to work towards the emergence of eco-pedagogy as a unified global pedagogical approach to education will come across what Lummis describes as ‘layers of conservative protocol within the state education department’.¹⁰ Additionally, the teacher who begins the transformation to eco-pedagogue also faces difficulties. Becoming an eco-pedagogue places a teacher in professional danger, with difficulties gaining promotions, being seen as a troublemaker, or even as a radical attempting to dismantle power structures. To compound the matter, dangers faced by educators could vary, depending on the location of the educator. Educators in the UK may face dismissal from their profession, and those in conservative countries may face life-threatening consequences – no means an exaggeration when considering the high toll of environmental activist murders in Central and Southern America.¹¹

Critical pedagogues and a move towards eco-pedagogy are, I would argue a necessary future of education, however, there are many critics who consider eco-pedagogy as extreme and, quite possibly unethical. Jones *et al.* consider sustainable education in its current state as a tokenistic failure and agree that pedagogy needs transformation; however, they also question whether it is the role of the educator to become a critical pedagogue and shape the beliefs and values of young children as such.¹² Furthermore, there are debates on whether questioning standards and examinable subjects is necessary and whether sustainability can be addressed alongside a traditional educational system. Prabawa-Sear & Dow, however, note that when there are attempts to incorporate learning about sustainability, sustainability competes with other school priorities and becomes downgraded in the engagement and importance placed upon it.¹³ Alongside this, there are disagreements within the realm of education for sustainability about definitions, directions and purpose, with some educators seeking planetary justice, and others seeking a diverse and extreme change in education. Mueller seeks to reform the current education system gradually, whereas Shantz argues that a radical transformation of the education system is necessary to ‘change the social structures that support and perpetuate unequal social relations’.¹⁴ Attempts are further exacerbated by real-world news of governments halting, and even attacking, movements in liberal education, as seen in the attempts to include critical race theory and decolonisation of curriculum being met by legislative banning in 22 states in the USA and, in the UK, the schools minister Nick Gibb commenting that there was no need to ‘decolonise’ the national curriculum.¹⁵ The situation is no less positive in higher education, with only a fifth of universities in the UK committing to reforming harmful curriculum.¹⁶ Eco-pedagogy attempts to deconstruct systems of power which harness inequality for profit, and it would be naive to think that this would not amass resistance politically, professionally and socially.

Concluding thoughts

Unchecked global environmental, social and cultural disasters are signposts of the Anthropocene, and I would contend that transformational environmental pedagogies, such as eco-pedagogy, are a response to the extreme challenges young people must face in the very near future. Eco-pedagogy enables educators to transform the profession and the structure of education to become something that attempts to dismantle inequality and bring harmony to the earth and the people who inhabit it. Education has a primary role to play in the reversal of the unchecked damages inflicted on the globe, and there are institutions and groups of educators who have begun the process of transformation from conservative education to eco-pedagogy. The death of the teacher, and the subsequent rise of the critical eco-pedagogue, will model to children and society praxis

which brings no harm, increases sustainability, diminishes inequality and welcomes in a new age of planetary justice.

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Notes

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