

THE WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: FROM PILOT PROJECTS TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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The policy rhetoric surrounding education for sustainable development (ESD) consistently advocates a holistic and integrated approach to the implementation and practice of ESD in the formal education system. It is increasingly apparent, however, that this approach is not commonly adopted with positive examples largely limited to pilot projects or model schools implemented under the auspices of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or individual advocates of ESD, rather than in a systemic and coordinated manner. This article will outline a whole-school approach, to ESD that includes examples where such an approach has been successfully implemented and highlights some of the key challenges that must be addressed to make the widespread adoption of the whole-school approach to ESD a reality.

Whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to ESD calls for sustainable development to be integrated throughout the formal sector curriculum in a holistic manner, rather than being taught on a stand alone basis. This philosophy supports the notion that ESD is education *for* sustainable development rather than education *about* sustainable development. In practice, this approach means that a school will incorporate teaching and learning for sustainable development not only through aspects of the curriculum, but also through sustainable school operations such as integrated governance, stakeholder and community involvement, long-term planning, and sustainability monitoring and evaluation. Whole-school approaches also advocate for active and participatory learning, a hallmark of ESD, and call for the entire school, including students, educators and administrators, to be actively engaged in working towards a sustainable school with ESD fully integrated into the curriculum as the driving factor.

Various documents and declarations at the international, regional and national levels support this whole-school approach to ESD implementation. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO's) International Implementation Scheme for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005) states that ESD should be

interdisciplinary, holistic and participatory, with ‘learning for sustainable development embedded in the whole curriculum, not as a separate subject’ (UNESCO, 2005:4).

Similar statements have been made at the regional level. For example, Education and Environment Ministers from across Europe adopted a Regional Strategy for ESD in 2005 that was developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in consultation with numerous stakeholders. Recommendations included working towards a whole-school approach to ESD in the formal education system, whereby ‘pupils and students, teachers, managers and other staff, as well as parents, should follow principles of sustainable development’ and integrate ESD themes across the curriculum (UNECE, 2005). Similar recommendations were made in the Asia-Pacific Regional Strategy for the Decade of ESD, which advocated, among other things, a holistic approach to the incorporation of sustainable development themes into the curricula of formal education systems (UNESCO, 2005a).

These international commitments and declarations for an integrated approach to ESD have been echoed in national ESD policy statements in many nations. Australia’s National Statement for the United Nations Decade of ESD, for example, advocates cross-disciplinary studies and integration of sustainable development in key learning areas that provide opportunities for participation and action (Australian Department of Environment and Heritage, 2006). Finland maintains that sustainable development must be included in all subjects and that the entire operational culture of a school must support learning for sustainable development (Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2006). The United Kingdom echoes this approach and has advocated for the integration of sustainable development throughout the curriculum and through the management and operations of school facilities, such as transport, food and buildings (UK Department of Education and Skills, 2005). These approaches provide students, teachers, and other staff members with opportunities to be active participants in the learning process.

The whole-school approach: from pilot projects to systemic change

Despite widespread support for this approach to ESD at national and international levels, there are relatively few concrete examples of schools in which this approach has been systematically implemented. A more common trend appears to be partial implementation of just a few aspects of ESD as curriculum add-ons or experiential learning units. While these

approaches provide useful learning opportunities for students, they fall well short of achieving the objective of a whole-school approach to ESD. Where examples of the whole-school approach do exist, they tend to be pilot projects in individual schools rather than a system-wide or school-board approach to implementation.

An example of a successful pilot project is the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI), which is a partnership between the Australian Government, States and Territories that aims to support schools and their communities in becoming sustainable through a whole-system and whole-school approach to sustainability. AuSSI promotes the active engagement of stakeholders in programme development and management, including students, teachers, administrators, and communities. AuSSI started as a pilot initiative in 2001 and recently received government endorsement to expand and consolidate beyond the pilot stage in several States and Territories. Over 2,000 schools now participate in the Initiative, providing a potential model for other jurisdictions on how to expand beyond the pilot stage.

The International Eco-Schools Programme also takes a holistic, participatory approach to learning for sustainability. The aim of the Programme is to engage students through classroom study, school and community action to raise their awareness of sustainable development issues. Eco-Schools provide an integrated system for the environmental management of schools and involve all stakeholders in this process. After a period of participation, each school participating in the Programme is assessed; successful schools are awarded a 'Green Flag', a recognised eco-label for environmental education and performance. Initially a European programme, Eco-Schools are now represented in almost all European Union member states, various countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and some pilot projects in Japan and other parts of the world.

Finland provides an example of a country in which the whole-school approach is more systematically implemented in the formal education system than most other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. Seven cross-cutting themes penetrate all formal subjects in the Finnish school curriculum at primary and secondary levels. These themes include development education, cultural identity, internationalism, responsibility for nature and sustainable development (Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2006). These themes help to define the operational culture of schools and include cultural identity, participatory citizenship, responsibility for the environment, sustainable development and media skills (Houtsonen, 2005).

Key challenges and opportunities

Despite the success of the programmes noted above, significant challenges remain in transitioning the whole-school approach to ESD from the pilot stage to a wide-spread systemic implementation in the formal education sector.

Time and resource constraints are identified by teachers and school administrators as common barriers to ESD implementation. Adopting a whole-school approach to teaching and learning is viewed by many as simply impractical given current constraints on teachers' time within already overcrowded curricula (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004; Learning for a Sustainable Future, 2006; Jackson, 2007). ESD continues to be conceptualised by many practitioners as an 'add-on', rather than a holistic change in teaching and learning practices. To obtain support from school administrators, governments and teachers alike, it is necessary to highlight the importance of curricula integration, rather than the creation of new courses. It is also critical to underscore to decision makers the cost savings that can ensue from more sustainable operations within schools.

Leadership challenges, both within schools and within their larger administrative communities, are prevalent in moving toward a more systemic approach to ESD in schools, a trend articulated in a recently released report (Jackson, 2007). Results of this study show that those leaders who develop sustainability within their schools are motivated by a personal passion for sustainability. The same study noted a lack of priority for sustainable development within many local government authorities and a consequent lack of institutional support for implementation of ESD in schools. It is critical that governments harness the energy and commitment of individual leaders, communities and NGOs who support the whole-school approach to ESD to drive a more systemic implementation of ESD for a greater impact. Enhanced leadership could create the governance structure necessary to ensure the longevity and sustainability of ESD.

Studies show gaps in appropriate pedagogy and curriculum development in teacher training, the absence of a positive vision, and a general lack of conviction that individual teacher efforts will really make a difference. Teachers also require greater capacity to undertake the immense and challenging task of implementing a whole-school approach to ESD (Sustainable Development Education Panel, 2003). Enhanced pre-service and in-service teacher training is urgently required for educators to be able to act as effective facilitators in the ESD process.

A whole-school approach to ESD presents a significant opportunity for the formal education sector. Not only can it enhance the environmental

performance of schools as institutions, but it can raise the quality of education and build a more sustainable future by imparting the values and tools that today's children and youth will need to build and maintain more sustainable societies. Commitment to change is required from all stakeholders, from grassroots activists to educators to policymakers. Only by working together at all levels can we ensure that ESD moves beyond the realm of pilot projects and individual case studies to a more system-wide catalyst for change.

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