Can education be virtue for sustainable development, a source of knowledge, moralization and vector for long-term societal transformations?

Sustainable development is about having a common sense: if we do not maintain our house, it will ultimately collapse. In actual fact, the metaphor of “the house is burning” is recurrent since the 1970s in environmental writings\(^1\), campaigns and at various international conferences. The intent of this has been to dramatize the urgent need for sustainable thinking and practice, evidently with certain success. Governments around the world now acknowledge the precept of sustainable development, often by creating formal agencies and allocating of important amounts of human and financial resources towards environmental protection goals. On the other hand, many local societies have continued to demonstrate considerable sagacity in safeguarding a balanced eco-system for the use of present and future generations\(^2\). Over the recent decades, certain philosophers have gone as far as calling for creating a “natural contract” (Serres, 1992)\(^3\) with all living things, including the cosmos.

While an extensive and positive notion of sustainable development espousing certain rationality, principles and even exigency is deeply satisfying, the past experience suggests that simple moral prescriptions are never sufficient to bring about significant societal changes. Here a distinction should be made between the concepts of morals and ethics, the latter being more imperative as it is embedded frequently in sanctioned, legal regulatory structures. Even so, this tells little about the power of the powerful. To privileged social groups, populations and spatial zones (rich and political elites worldwide, urban middle classes, industrialized countries), sustainable development is about preserving their quality of life, protecting convenient recreational zones or demonstrating of certain civility. A considerable degree of ambiguity is evident in their attitudes and actions, given that, while the general principle of sustainable development may be admitted (certain environmental values are even idealized), but, in reality, few are willing to give up the comforts and privileges that they enjoy by virtue of being a part of the existing patterns of unequal resource distributions at various levels. Their engagements are frequently purely discursive. Nevertheless, they are most inclined towards technocratic prescriptions, interpretations of universality and experiences of modernity that essentially reflects a certain historical trajectory, thereby serving the interests of a small part of the world populations or territories. This case exemplifies a situation something very similar to what Plato (1956) had described: privileged individuals would never hesitate to presenting themselves as being “just”, while taking a great deal of advantages by forming the part of unjust power relations and inequalities.

Naturally, short-term profit makers do not lack - and this is so in poorer societies as well. The mantras of economic growth and greater utilization of market mechanisms, on the one hand, and vanishing of grand political projects and utopias, on the other, incite everyone to develop a mentality that can be
described as “grab all you can.” This while the poorer groups are unable to see the fruits of modernization and squeezed between an extreme desire for increased consumption and few means to satisfy them, may have no other viable alternatives than to continuously utilize locally available common resources, at times beyond their regenerating capacities. Clearly, in the absence of broader social changes, a mere idealistic conception of sustainable development has little sense in these kinds of circumstances.

The vital question is therefore: who can change the course of the history, middle classes, poorer communities, governments, international organizations, technological innovations, market forces, and popular and forceful mobilizations by social organizations? In this context, specifically what should be the role of education, recognizing that education too is subject to considerable influence by the existing (and previous) social norms, values and dominant power structures? Education is, for good or bad, an intellectual construct. Educational reforms can easily fall into the trap of being too confident, similar to the experiences in many branches of natural and social sciences, in using certain notions, available statistics, references to socio-historical evolutions and anticipated outcomes. Time and again, they may also fall into the trap of near evangelic oversimplifications in carving solutions and future lines of action. Above all, education is subject to manipulations by the ruling elites.

Various chapters making this sizeable volume fully recognize many of these complexities. The strengths and shortcomings of the existing pedagogical theories and conceptual framework are examined in order to address the question of sustainable development, and the reader is provided with plentiful useful references for further reading. The main concern remains: how do we understand the issue of sustainability in education in its entirety in consideration of its contradictions and multifaceted nature?

But the strength of this book is distinctly on its capacity to assemble and analyze a wide variety of contemporary themes and issues dealing with pedagogical innovations for sustainable development. The topics covered include the development of sustainability in education programs in such varied areas as watershed literary, energy saving, construction projects, green chemistry and electronic textbooks. Considerable attention is paid to highlighting the importance of generating social awareness among diverse production and consumer groups in rural to urban areas, as well as from developed to developing countries. The prime focus of this collected work is undoubtedly the issue of appropriate curriculum development for the elementary to high schools going up to the university courses specialized in diverse disciplines such as engineering, business, and social studies. A fresh and rigorous investigation of localized contexts makes the book empirically highly valuable. Finally, the book opens up new research perspectives for continued theoritzations, analyses, public discussions and policy formulation in this very important area of social engineering, stressing in particular the need to fully comprehending the linkages between local and wider dynamics, including the role of rapidly evolving technologies and communication channels - induced in part by the current processes of globalization and prevailing structures of worldwide power relations.

A book of this nature is surely very timely for university students and teachers, public libraries, social and campaign organizations, government agencies as well as regional bodies and international organizations.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 One of the legendary initiatives: the report of the Club of Rome established in 1968 warned that, “If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years,” (Meadows et. al., 1972, p. 23).

2 The notion of “future generations” is surely not the first invention of the Brundtland report on sustainable development in the late 1980s.

3 Obviously, the term “natural contract” makes direct reference to that of Rousseau’s “social contract”, in that an individual renounces natural liberty (the freedom to do anything s/he desires) in exchange for broad civil rights and protection.

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