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ENVIRONMENT AND SCHOOL INITIATIVES

Lessons from the ENSI Network –
Past, Present and Future

Christine Affolter, Attila Varga (Eds.)



HUNGARIAN INSTITUTE FOR
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND
DEVELOPMENT



THE PENDULUM SWINGS BUT IS IT MOVING? SPIRALLING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY THE ENSI-WAY

by Arjen E.J. Wals, Wageningen University, The Netherlands / University of Gothenburg, Sweden

The secret to a long life is knowing when it's time to go
(Michelle Shocked, from the Texas Campfire Tapes, 1986)

CYCLES AND SEASONS

Thirty years of innovation and activism 'end' with this book, commemorating the achievements of ENSI and looking forward at what might be ahead in the post-ENSI era. Michelle Shocked's song 'the secret to a long life' is not about sustainability. In fact, it is about Billy Barlow, a poor boy who robbed the Union Grove Bank. When I first heard the song, in 1987 or so, during the time that I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan with Bill Stapp as my mentor, I did not listen to the lyrics very well. All that stuck with me was the catchy somewhat melancholic refrain and its deeper meaning. First, I thought it meant that not delaying going to the toilet, not trying to hold it in, but going when you need to will guarantee old-age. Later, its meaning became more sophisticated, more profound perhaps, when I thought that to be able to continue for ever in a healthy way requires the courage to say: 'We have done this, it has served its purpose and there is no need to keep it going just to keep it going; instead it might be wiser to turn our energy and attention elsewhere.'

The secret to sustainability and indeed to a long life, is to know that there are cycles and seasons. There is not just Spring, with its excitement, growth and expansion, there are other seasons as well that are critical and are about consolidation and even decay and contraction. Sometimes we need to let go to move on or to enable others to move on. This is not easy. In our epoch – whether we call it the Anthropocene, the age of neo-liberalism or the post-truth era – there is a push for continuous innovation, adaptation to 'inevitable' change, life-long learning to keep up and stay competitive on a shrinking and dynamic labour market. We need to keep going, be on the move. Slowing down, being happy with who we are and where we are, sharing goods and services, closing cycles, looking for meaning, rather than for excitement and thrills, are not seen as helping the economy grow – which somehow has become an existential goal. This is not to say that everybody in the world is as privileged as I am or as the people who are reading this text are. There are plenty of people who live under unacceptable conditions, who are not happy where they are or with the conditions which they are forced to live in. There is a continued need

to reflect on what sustainable development means in different contexts. Perhaps, when interrogating the notion of development itself and bearing in mind the four seasons, we need to begin to think of sustainability as an *alternative to development*. This brings us to the deeper questions.

CONVERGENCE AND OVERCOMING BINARIES

Throughout the years, ENSI provided a platform for educators, research-practitioners and policy-makers seeking to become more reflexive, to pause and ask deeper questions about the meaning of education in a globalising world that fails to live within planetary boundaries. It also sought to create cultures of learning in our schools, as opposed to cultures of accountability that stifle creativity and school's own initiatives. In the past 30 years, it created an alternative story, a counter-narrative, if you will, that challenged the taken for granted, normalized, binaries such as the ones between 'research and practice', 'school and community', 'science and arts, humanities' and between 'local-global', 'nature-environment' and, more recently 'environment and sustainability'. ENSI brought together two kinds of concerns that up until then had not been much connected; a concern for empowerment, participation and democracy in education on the one hand, and a concern for the environment on the other. Put differently, it brought together participatory Action Research and Environmental Education which paved the way for more emancipatory forms of Environmental Education; Environmental Education that looked beyond instrumentally using schools to change pupil's environmental behaviours. Although elsewhere in the world there were similar turns away from instrumental Environmental Education towards more emancipatory Environmental Education (think of Action Research and Community Problem Solving as it was initiated in Michigan (e.g. Bull et al., 1988; Wals, Stapp and Beringer, 1990) or the work by Ian Robottom in Australia (Robottom, 1987), and the work of Rob O'Donaghue in South Africa ('O Donaghue and McNaught, 1989), all in the late eighties and early nineties, ENSI pioneered such an approach in Europe.

The emancipatory perspective put more emphasis on the second E in EE so to speak: education. Up until then EE had been dominated in most parts of the world by experts and policy-makers with an environmental or ecological background and a concern for the well-being of the planet. With ENSI it seemed more the other way around: people with a pedagogical or, more generally, an education background and concerned with the well-being of children and teachers, became connected to socio-ecological-environmental matters of concern. Through ENSI, key-thinkers in educational Action Research like Peter Posch and John Elliott, became connected

to the idea of engaging schools in environmental concerns. Their interest in 'environment' also generated interest from others connected to education but not to Environmental Education, in looking at environmental concerns as a catalyst for educational renewal on the one hand, and as a way to live healthier, more equitably and, as we say today, more sustainably, on the other. This convergence can be seen as a major contribution of ENSI to some current manifestations of EE and, indeed, of ESD that are grounded in critical thinking, reflexivity and more systemic views of schooling, teaching and learning.

TRANSGRESSION

As Paul Hart (2007) noted over 10 years ago, the ENSI approach opened up possibilities for social learning as a healthy departure from up until then, the dominant individual learning rooted in cognitive psychology. Already in 1999, John Elliott, in reflecting back on ENSI's first 10-year accomplishments, pointed to the transgressive and counter-hegemonic qualities of the work and the network. He observed (Elliott, 1999) that ENSI's agenda transgressed traditional educational boundaries (e.g., across subject specialisms, formal and informal, school and community, teaching and research, knowing and acting, childhood dependency and adult responsibility). By doing so, ENSI was again, well ahead of its time, as today we talk about learning ecologies, boundary crossing and transgressive learning (e.g. Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2016). These transgressions, as Hart (2007) suggested, were intentional, arising from recognition that adequate educational response to environmental concerns requires education that prepares people to participate in shaping the social economic and environmental conditions, local to global. ENSI expanded notions of what counts as knowledge and what constitutes learning, by creating spaces for the active generation of knowledge by children and teachers within local communities with real-life issues that require critical reflective and thoughtful action (Posch, 1999). As such ENSI was one of the first programmes that raised fundamental issues about the nature of knowledge and the nature of learning, not just theoretically but at the interface between theory and practice.

Elliott (1991) referred to ENSI shortly after its creation as a form of 'practical wisdom' (see also Peters and Wals, 2013) that emerges from forms of action-based inquiry through which students reflect on their experience of living in the environment, identify problems and then develop and test practical solutions. Knowledge acquisition is integrated into a process of enabling students to clarify and resolve problems as real and personal for them. This type of inquiry and practical wisdom building pre-supposes a sense of student initiative and self-discipline, but also

teamwork, open dialogue and co-responsibility and a learning process requiring high levels of decision-making and problem-solving skills in both teachers and students. As such ENSI connected well with Action Research and Community Problem Solving (ARCPS) that also started in the early ENSI-years (Wals et al. 1990).

There is no doubt that ENSI challenged existing learning cultures. Inevitably this work created disruptions and controversies among school staff and community members. As Posch (1991) noted in the early years, many cultures do not expect teachers or their students to define and tackle real world issues independently and to monitor themselves. Hart (2007, p. 320) adds to this observation that, *“the prevailing culture of teaching and learning in most countries is conservative and static. Today, however, the roots of complexity lie in the conflicting new demands on schools given rapid changes in notions of work, technology and knowledge itself.”*

WHOLE SCHOOL-COMMUNITY APPROACH FROM SYSTEMATIC TO SYSTEMIC

ENSI also can be seen as a predecessor of what we nowadays refer to as a Whole School Approach to sustainability. Already in the 90's ENSI embarked on the idea of creating schools, learning environments and school-community relationships that would create a school ethos that would, so to speak, 'breathe' inclusion, democracy, good health and environmental and cultural sensitivity. A Whole School Approach to sustainability education means '...working to make the educational institution a microcosm of the emerging sustainable society, rather than of the unsustainable society (Sterling, 2001, p.33). Through the ENSI-related CoDeS network these somewhat abstract and seemingly utopian ideas were developed, tested and shared in many European countries.

So where 30 years ago the seeds of a whole school-community approach were planted, we now see a movement, albeit slowly regrettably, from the fringes of education towards the mainstream. The ENSI niches are, again slowly, becoming regimes and landscapes to use transition management speak (Geels and Schot, 2007). As such ENSI has paved the way for a more systemic approach to sustainable development and a more pedagogical perspective on the role of education. The ENSI-way will continue to remain critical in the coming years during which we are to engage meaningfully with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Piece-meal or ad-hoc approaches where schools and the communities of which they are part, add bits and pieces of the sustainability puzzle, without creating synergies or considering the system as a whole, simply won't do. ENSI has always seen the reciprocity between education and sustainability as mutually

reinforcing processes where a focus on sustainability can be a catalyst for the kind of school redesign, educational innovation and school-community engagement that is more likely to lead to deeper, value-based local responses to global sustainable development challenges. Such an approach, in the end, will be far more effective than conditioning people to behave in a certain way.

It must be acknowledged that currently both primary and secondary schools across Europe are trying to engage in Sustainable Development. Based on the limited research available it appears that their attempts fail due to a number of factors, including rigid national curricula that lack responsiveness to emerging topics, lack of awareness and understanding of critical sustainability challenges, a strong emphasis on measurable outcomes in science areas that are covered by international rankings such as PISA, the lack of capacity, tools and methods in approaching cross-cutting themes holistically, inadequate teacher education, weak school-community relations and a lack of integrative approaches (Manna and McGuinn, 2013).

Indeed, it may seem that we haven't moved much in 30 years. As many of these barriers have been around for quite some time, the pendulum swings between hope and despair. Schools can be very resilient in an unhealthy way, in that they are hard to change even when the world around them is in flux. At the same time, we must also recognize that things are changing in a positive way (see for instance UNESCO's Global Education Monitor Report, UNESCO, 2016). The ENSI-way has provided ideas, concepts, tools and inspiring examples of systemic approaches to sustainability that surely have influenced such positive changes. ENSI has also shown that members of the school community, including those belonging to local businesses, NGOs and government, as well as scientists, can work together in jointly investigating and testing ways to improve schools in an all-round way. As such, ENSI advocated co-creation and multi-stakeholder social learning well before these concepts became popular in sustainability governance (Sol et al. 2017). So, yes, the pendulum swings but there is movement when looking at the bigger picture and when zooming in on those niches of resistance and co-creation.

What has become clear over the years is that successful school development is co-operative and participatory and needs to be a part of a wider societal or social movement or, as we say today, part of a transition towards more localized, semi-autonomous 'off-the-grid' but networked systems. Such systems require forms of reflexive self-regulation, high levels of trust in the capabilities of all involved and freedom to learn and experiment. In the end it is such freedom, trust, reflexivity and

capability, when connected to an ethic of care that will create a world that is more sustainable than the one in prospect. ENSI has played a crucial role in educational transformation towards sustainability, but now it's time to pass on the baton and to let the lessons learnt travel further. Its time has come, it's time to go.

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