



Educating for Sustainable Development: are Schools Capable of Doing So?

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Introduction

“Environmental education for sustainable development must be a substantial component in students’ initial training, from the youngest age and throughout their schooling, so as to enable them to acquire the knowledge and methods necessary to situate themselves in their environment and to act in it in a responsible way.”

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While the need for sustainable development education is no longer an issue for the various ministries of education, it is surprising to observe in schools that, in practice, it is left up to volunteer teachers, often those who are personally committed to the cause. We shall not spend time on the underlying political causes of this state of affairs. On the other hand, we ought to admit that the reticence is not just at this level. Educating for sustainable development (ESD) is not simply adding a discipline to the school curriculum. This concept brings into question a number of paradigms in our ways of thinking, of viewing the world, of understanding it, analysing it, how we project ourselves in it, behave in it and make decisions within it. This is not without consequences on the education that is required. Thus, in order to better grasp the challenges, as well as the difficulties that schools can face in responding to ministerial decrees, one must pinpoint the specificities of such an education in comparison to what usually happens in class.

ESD in official documents

If we examine French and Swiss official documents, we can see for example, that “awareness of environmental, economic and sociocultural issues must help students – in a way that is not foreboding but lucid - to better perceive the interdependence of human societies and the whole planetary system, and the need for everyone to adopt behaviour in line with its sustainable management as well as that of world solidarity¹.” Or, that the aim of ESD is to “prepare each person to take part in the country’s social, cultural, civic, political and economic life, by strengthening a sense of responsibility, the faculty of discernment and independent judgment.” And to “make each student progressively aware that he/she belongs to the surrounding world by awakening in him/her respect for others, a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, and attachment to the objectives of sustainable development.²”

In terms of changes within the school, what does that mean in terms of current practices?

First of all, that students are meant to broach subjects that are not part of the usual curriculum, as they will need to be capable of developing awareness of environmental, economic and sociocultural problems, and that they need to be prepared for civic and political life. These subjects are not part of the programme.

In addition, they need to develop particular skills, as they are meant to perceive - and thus recognise - the multiple interdependencies between systems, develop their faculties of discernment and independent judgment.

Last but not least, attitudes that are favourable to sustainable development ought to be developed, such as adopting behaviour that is favourable to the sustainable management of these interdependencies, strengthening their sense of responsibility, and developing respect, solidarity (global!) and a spirit of cooperation.

In other words, this means that:

- Schools need to fundamentally rethink how they function, what their social role is and what their objectives and pedagogy are by asking themselves basic questions such as what knowledge to bring to the forefront, the content of programmes, objectives, themes to broach, evaluation, etc.
- In order to develop an understanding of these connections, they need to get out of their usual disciplinary functioning and engage in an inter- or cross-disciplinary way of working which, though often extolled, is rarely applied.
- In order to open their minds to the complexity of issues connected to ESD and consider logical frameworks in which haziness, haphazardness and controversy have a place, they need to accept to get out of their usual ways of thinking and open their minds to other forms of logic. These include, for example, relativity, contextualisation, a search for an optimum,

1 _ Official Bulletin No. 28, 15 July 2004, French Ministry of National Education. Extract of the text addressed to academy rectors and inspectors, directors of departmental services, heads of establishments and school directors.

2 _ brochure_2_07.pdf downloaded on 3 September 2007 from the Geneva Public Education Department (DIP) website.

the management of uncertainty, etc.

- They need to offer access to other points of view, to offer opportunities to question our own vision of things and of reality.

- They need to teach students to have a curious and critical outlook so as to enable them to look “behind” what appears obvious. And this in order to enable students to enter processes that require a real desire to become involved. For example, by seeking to find out about eco-balances, if only to become responsible consumers.

- In the same vein, one must show them the different forms of manipulation to which they fall victim, starting by advertising (the promotion of brands is characteristic of this), the incessant creation of “new needs” in response to those of unbridled economic growth and, more generally, to images, including information conveyed by television or the Internet.

- Finally, this critical spirit must also help to develop a real awareness of our responsibilities.

- In order to pursue this route, schools must therefore broach real education in values, which first need to be clarified. While it is great to want to establish more respect, solidarity and cooperation, they must not be imposed like the morality classes of yesteryear, but voluntarily adopted by students because they can see that they make sense and are needed. To go in this direction, what is needed even more than values education is a real clarification of values so as to help students to answer three fundamental questions:

o What do I really want?

o Why do I want it?

o How much effort am I willing to make to get it?

o While bearing in mind that I am not the only person on this Earth.

- To end this non-exhaustive list, let us say that in order to reach the totality of these objectives, the usual pedagogies also need to be reviewed. If the traditional teaching class still makes sense at certain times, it must absolutely be complemented by more active learning methods. Learning to work in networks, in synergy, setting competition more with oneself than with others in order to develop a sense of cooperation are all challenges that the pedagogy must meet in order to go beyond the obsolete models on which schools still too often function.

And the Scout Movement in all that?

One can see that, although all these changes would certainly bring schools the new impetus that they need so much, as well as develop citizens who may be more respectful of the Earth and people on it, the institution is not ready to make such a radical change. Of course, a first phase could easily be undertaken by working on integrating ESD into existing subjects, but we are still far away from this compromise, despite political promises and the pretty speeches that accompany them.

Other vehicles are therefore indispensable to transform society and – with time – schools. And, even though I do not know the Scout Movement from the inside, it seems to me that its organisation, the way in which it functions, the activities it proposes, the social relationships

that it develops, etc., can – if they do not already do so – play an active part in reaching these objectives.

- For example, contrary to school that is orientated towards the acquisition of knowledge, the Scout Movement – just like ESD – is essentially based on the values of respect, solidarity towards others and a spirit of cooperation. The Scouts also add honour and loyalty to this, which are perfectly complementary.

- In the organisation of camps, importance is also given to the intergenerational aspect. If well managed, this can also contribute to developing responsibility, self-reliance and caring for others. It can also contribute to this spirit of cooperation that is so important.

- The way in which camps and other activities are carried out enable the development of a special relationship with nature. This can be about gaining simple knowledge about – perhaps even appreciation for – nature, using it as a playground and living space that help one to become more sensitive to it and imbued with it, which – while important as such – can be complemented by paying special attention to the interaction between mankind and nature, and the place that mankind occupies in the biosphere's complex system.

- Finally, the rigour of rules, order and discipline certainly often makes up for parents' abdication in terms of education. Knowing and recognising the limits of individual freedom and understanding that a "right" also implies a "duty" are also building blocks to establishing mutual respect, something that is ever more lacking at school. Especially when this rigidity and rigour are counterbalanced by real moments of fun and frank friendship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to refer to certain presentations made prior to this one and the questions that arise from them. It was noted several times that the children were happy to talk about what they had done during their camps. This is intrinsically positive and corresponds well to the space of freedom and the opportunities to overcome personal limits that Scout camps offer. And, as Cesare Scurati said, Scouting is skilled at "transforming tasks and duties into adventure".

Nevertheless, there is still a question. Teachers and educational specialists know full well that "learning by doing" extolled throughout these two days is not enough to acquire know-how related to knowledge, attitudes or values. Yes, in order to learn how to light a fire or set up a cabin, the best way is certainly still to actually do it, but it is not the same for less concrete know-how. Scouts have much more sophisticated objectives, in particular related to the acquisition of certain values and of certain associated forms of behaviour. A research study carried out by Swiss Scouts would appear to show that no difference in attitude, particularly vis-à-vis nature, was noted amongst people aged 40, irrespective of whether they had been Scouts in their youth or not. Another study, presented in a workshop by Professor Amoateng, also shows that "leadership" skills, which are strongly developed in certain Scouts, are not apparent in their everyday lives.

These few observations bring me to ask a fundamental question. Scouts find themselves in a group in which they recognise each other and feel recognised, a fact intensified by the fact of wearing a uniform. A kind of barrier is then created between the "Scout world" and the "outside world". How can this barrier be broken down so that the know-how gained during camps can really be used in everyday life? It must certainly go through phases of

metacognition, of “knowing what is known”, during which a certain formalisation of what has been experienced takes place. In order to do so, there is no need to “ape” the more off-putting aspects of school. A “talking stick” around a campfire, enabling each person to make his/her own assessment and to envisage how what has been experienced can be transposed to everyday life, may be sufficient. Putting into words one’s own emotions and feelings is both about standing back from one’s experiences and becoming conscious of what has been acquired.

In the same vein, Scouting stimulates a social life that is tending more and more to disappear, at least in our industrialised societies where the individual is more important than society. There again, as Dakmara Ana Georgescu pointed out, it is an opportunity that would be worth highlighting. Solidarity, mutual assistance and empathy are all forms of “savoir-être” that are cruelly lacking in our societies but which are nonetheless the keys to living better tomorrow.

It would therefore be interesting to have a more in-depth exploration on how leaders are trained for their task. As many seem to come from the teaching world, sensitisation - perhaps even training - to highlight the necessary transposition of what has been acquired to everyday life should not be too difficult to establish.

Finally, one must not forget that knowledge, while important (one can only be curious if one already has some knowledge), is only a secondary influence on our life choices, well after our values.

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