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Interrogating Equity in Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The discourse of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promises a brighter, more just, and equitable future by ‘leaving no one behind’ and identifies Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a tool for reaching this future. This paper presents a critical analysis of whether Education for Sustainable Development in its current form is fit for this purpose, based on its conceptualizations of equity. Through this paper, I argue that the way ESD is conceptualized today suffers from a ‘design flaw’ as it is embedded in the dominant theory of neo-liberalism. I showcase that neoliberalism promotes a narrow concept of equity that is (i) top-down in nature, (ii) a by-product of economic growth, and (iii) seen merely as distribution of resources. I assert that for ESD to truly deliver on ‘leaving no one behind’ it needs to be re-conceptualized through ideas and theories that broaden the concept of equity: *reflexivity* and *ecojustice*. I begin by elaborating on the evolution of ESD and sharing how the concept is conceptualized by key international organizations. I then situate ESD within the neoliberal paradigm before demonstrating how neoliberalism espouses equity. I problematize these conceptualizations of equity, contending that they are restricted in scope and inhibit ESD from being a ‘transformative’ education. Finally, I reconceptualize ESD using two intersectional frameworks that broaden the notion of equity: reflexivity and ecojustice.

Resumen

El discurso de las Metas de Desarrollo (SDGs) de la ONU promete un futuro más próspero, justo y equitativo por ‘no dejar a nadie atrás’ e identifica la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (ESD) como herramienta para lograr este futuro. Este trabajo presenta un análisis crítico sobre si la educación para el desarrollo sostenible en su forma actual es adecuada para tal fin, mediante su conceptualización de la equidad. En este trabajo, sostengo que la manera en que la ESD es conceptualizada, sufre un ‘defecto de diseño’ ya que está integrado en la teoría predominante del neoliberalismo. Demuestro que el neoliberalismo promueve un concepto limitado de equidad ya que es (i) un enfoque arriba-abajo por naturaleza (ii) un subproducto del crecimiento económico (iii) considerado simplemente como una distribución de recursos. Afirmo que para que ESD realmente cumpla con ‘no dejar a nadie atrás’, necesita ser re-conceptualizada a través de ideas y teorías que amplíen el concepto de equidad: *reflexividad* y *eco-justicia*. Empiezo por elaborar la evolución de ESD y como el concepto es definido por organizaciones internacionales importantes. A continuación, expongo ESD dentro del paradigma neoliberal antes de demostrar como el neoliberalismo defiende la equidad. Expongo problemas sobre estas conceptualizaciones de equidad sosteniendo que son restringidas e impiden a ESD de ser una educación ‘transformativa’. Finalmente, re-conceptualizo ESD usando dos marcos relacionados que enriquecen la noción de equidad: reflexividad y eco-justicia.

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Educación para un desarrollo sostenible, ESD, equidad, Educación ambiental, sustentabilidad.

المخلص:

يعد خطاب أهداف التنمية المستدامة للأمم المتحدة (SDGs) بمستقبل أكثر إشراقاً وإنصافاً من خلال "عدم إهمال أي أحد" ويحدد بأن التعليم أداة للوصول إلى هذا المستقبل، هو الوسيلة من أجل تنمية مستدامة. يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً نقدياً لما إذا كان التعليم في شكله الحالي من أجل التنمية المستدامة مناسباً لهذا الغرض، بناءً على تصورات العدالة. وناقش من خلال هذا البحث بأن الطريقة التي يتم بها تصور التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة اليوم يعاني من "عيب في التصميم" حيث إنه جزء لا يتجزأ من النظرية السائدة للبيرالية الجديدة. وأظهر بأن النيولبيرالية تروج لمفهوم ضيق للإنصاف ألا وهو (1) من أعلى إلى أسفل في طبيعته (2) منتج ثانوي للنمو الاقتصادي (3) يُنظر إليه على أنه مجرد توزيع للموارد. وأكد بأنه لكي يتحقق التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة فعلياً "بعدم إهمال أي أحد"، فإننا بحاجة إلى إعادة تصور هذا المفهوم من خلال الأفكار والنظريات التي توسع مفهوم العدالة، كمفهومين "التفكير ملياً" و"العدالة البيئية". أبدأ هذا البحث بشرح مفصل حول تطور مفهوم التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة وكيف تصبغ المنظمات الدولية الرئيسية هذا المفهوم. ومن ثم أضع التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة في إطار النموذج النيولبيرالي قبل توضيح كيف تتبنى النيولبيرالية مفهوم الإنصاف. أبين أن هناك إشكالية تكثف هذه المفاهيم المختلفة حول الإنصاف، معتبراً أنها مفيدة في نطاقها وتمنع التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة من أن يكون تعليمياً "تحويلياً" أي قادر على أحداث تغييرات مهمة. وأخيراً، أعدت تصور مفهوم التعليم من أجل التنمية المستدامة وذلك باستخدام إطارين متقاطعين يوسعان مفهوم الإنصاف ليضيفا إليه بعداً تأملياً/تفكري، وكذلك العدل البيئي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:
التعليم من أجل
التنمية المستدامة،
الإنصاف، التربية
البيئية، الاستدامة.

Introduction

It is an accepted fact that, in the 30 years since its birth, the results of environmental education have been precarious and have done very little to affect the accelerated process of global environmental degradation that has been principally brought about by a clearly augmenting rhythm of development. After these 30 years, environmental education is still an emerging field.¹ It is emerging politically due to its position with respect to the core of educational practices and environmental management, where it is still a peripheral issue; it is emerging conceptually not only because its questions continue to be relevant today, but also because it constantly questions and challenges the values that determine social rank in the world. (González-Gaudiano, 2005, p. 244)

Never before have environmental issues come to the forefront of political and public debate as they have today. Extreme, uncontrollable weather events such as floods, typhoons, wildfires have become commonplace globally, while disastrous levels of pollution in industrializing economies such as China and India have constituted a public health crisis. The realities of climate change stare at us, demanding that we see nature as a force to be reckoned with and not exploited, or else, face extinction. The looming realization that our survival on this earth is under threat, as is the future of the earth, has led to a public outcry spearheaded by mass climate

¹ González-Gaudiano adds a footnote here: "A process is 'emerging' not because it has just appeared, but because it constitutes a new configuration of signified which poses new questions and produces destabilizing effects of different kinds and varying intensities that compete to replace the former entrenched configuration or configurations. It is therefore a process of the redefinition of meaning. It also refers to how marginalized the process is with respect to the core of the structure."

movements often led by youth activists such as Greta Thunberg², demanding that those in power and responsible for our welfare act now. This narrative against environmental and social exploitation is no different from the age-old one of environmentalists and indigenous populations. However, it has taken the issue of climate change to become a global crisis to jolt a global awakening.

It is against this background that I consider the aforementioned words by González-Gaudio (2005) on environmental education to be of great relevance today. Within the crisis of climate change lies an opportunity for educationists from all disciplines to identify systems of exploitation and injustices towards the environment and towards people.

With the aim of working on such global challenges, the United Nations (UN) put in place the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (United Nations, n.d.). The UN Agenda 2030, which is the strategy and plan for the implementation of the SDGs, pledges to ‘Leave No One Behind’ (UNCDP, 2018) – a pledge aimed at fostering equity. One of the tools that the Agenda 2030 identifies to achieve the SDGs and thus promulgate equity is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD is an area of research, policy, and action that underpins and crosscuts all 17 SDGs (Bangay & Blum, 2010). Therefore, for the purpose of ‘leaving no one behind’, ESD itself as a concept must be equitable.

Through this paper, I therefore attempt to engage with the discipline of environmental education that is of greater significance today than ever, given the challenges of climate change. My rationale for doing so is to explore synergies the discipline could have with others such as development education, ecofeminist education, ecojustice education, amongst others. I see climate change as a challenge that allows for reflection and a step up from all fields to engage proactively. An intersectional approach is therefore key to a ‘transformational’ Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the broader field of environmental education.

ESD: Evolution and Definitions

The notion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was instituted by the United Nations (UN) in the 1980s during discussions on environmental protection and sustainable development. The idea of ESD was formally cemented at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) through Agenda 21.³ UNESCO was appointed the leading agency for conceptualizing the framework for Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, whose programme areas are aimed at ‘reorienting education towards sustainable development’,

² Greta Thunberg is a teenage climate activist who has been named TIME Person of the Year 2019: <https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg/>

³ Agenda 21 is the Action Plan of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in 1992

‘increasing public awareness’, and ‘promoting training’.⁴ Member states’ endorsements of ESD led to the years 2005 to 2014 being named the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) through a UN General Assembly resolution. Since the adoption of the UNDESD, nation states have aligned ESD with their formal education systems. The interpretation of ESD and thus the nature of the alignment in national policy frameworks vary across countries. In England, for example, ESD and environmental education entangle within the broader ambit of Development Education (Blum et al., 2013), while in Wales, the Government has introduced sector-specific policies under use of the term Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) to describe its approach (UK National Commission for UNESCO, 2010). Costa Rica’s primary ESD implementation is identified as the Ecological Blue Banner Programme for Schools (EBBPS) under the National Commitment on the ‘Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)’ in 2006 (UNESCO, 2013).⁵

While ESD found no recognition in the UN Millennium Development Goals, it is today recognized as a cross-cutting tool for the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2015, the World Education Summit in Incheon, Korea, Ministers of Education adopted a global education strategy entitled *Education 2030* to implement Sustainable Development Goal 4, and thus merged *Education for All* and ESD, as was envisaged originally in Agenda 21 (York University, n.d.). Advocates of ESD thus believe that implementation of the ESD in policy and practice is now an international priority for both formal and informal educators given its underlying status in the Education 2030 Agenda.

I now turn to formal international definitions of ESD. The 2009 Bonn Declaration on ESD asserts that “ESD is based on values of justice, equity, tolerance, sufficiency and responsibility” and “helps societies to address different priorities and issues inter alia water, energy, climate change...It is critical for the development of new economic thinking” (UNESCO, 2009).

UNESCO defines ESD as “holistic and transformational education” that is life-long, empowering its learners to “take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity” (UNESCO, 2016, para 1). UNESCO (2016) further elaborates on this definition highlighting, amongst other things, that ESD is “based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development”, “locally relevant and culturally appropriate”, “engages formal, non-formal and informal education”, and “is interdisciplinary. No single discipline can claim ESD for itself; all disciplines can contribute to ESD.”

⁴ Chapter 36 of UNCED Agenda 21: <http://www.un-documents.net/a21-36.htm>

⁵ I am only taking a few examples of how countries have aligned their education systems with ESD as it is not in the scope of this paper to delve into details or comparisons of implementation of ESD. With this paper, I hope to engage with ESD conceptually only.

Within the SDGs, ESD occurs most prominently in Target 4.7 under Goal 4 on Education:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016a).

As is evident, definitions of ESD vary according to the entity that defines it; however, they coalesce around their promising and all-encompassing nature including education not just on environmental issues but also human rights and gender equality. I thus concur with González-Gaudiano's (2005, p.243 & 245) evaluation of ESD as a conceptual 'grey area' and an "elusive thematic group of issues". At face value, however varied and bespoke definitions of ESD might seem, they are backed by a common dominant ideology: neoliberalism.

In the following section, I first demonstrate how ESD sits within the framework of neoliberalism. I then move on to problematize neo-liberalism on the grounds of its narrow endorsement of equity that restricts ESD from being the 'holistic and transformational' education that it hopes to be.

Neo-Liberalism, Equity, and ESD

Is ESD a neo-liberal concept?

The elusiveness around the meanings of ESD has allowed the concept to be globally accepted and locally contextualized. While I do not contest the appropriation of ESD into national policies as a result of its 'openness', I do concur with Bengtsson and Östman (2013) that its 'unproblematized equivalence', that has elevated it to the status of a key principle, could be political in nature. The ambiguity around ESD has allowed it to gain consensus internationally, rather than become a point of conflict. Bengtsson & Östman (2013) assert that, in this way, ESD has also provided leeway for powerful international organizations to influence educational agendas around the world around what seems to be globally relevant. This is a narrative similar to that of how the agenda of 'sustainable development' gained prominence internationally and today dominates the development agenda. Indeed, ESD is the educational offshoot of sustainable development and hence, derives its legitimacy from the same ideology of neoliberal capitalism.

Neoliberalism as an ideology is premised on the principles of economic liberalization and decentralization, marked by policies of free trade, open markets, privatization, deregulation, with a reduced role of the welfare State (Bessant et al., 2015). While the ideology is originally associated with a declining role of the State, Bessant et al. highlight that today there is an advent of 'roll back' or 'roll out' neoliberalism where the State paradoxically is "simultaneously non-

interventionist and decentralized in some realms, and highly interventionist and centralized in others” (2015, p.419).

The international development agenda in its origins is deeply entrenched in neoliberalism as it follows a market-driven model. Foregrounding the beginning of the development agenda was President Harry Truman’s speech in 1949 following the Second World War where he identified that poverty of the “undeveloped areas” of the world “is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas” (Truman 1949, line 44). This narrative continued in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992 whose Principles 2 and 3 called for the ‘right to development’ and the ‘sovereign rights of States to exploit their own resources’ respectively; while Principle 12 warned against environmental concerns restricting international trade (Biodiversity Unit, 2006; Jucker, 2004). The advocacy for unregulated free markets and free trade enabled transnational corporate investment, which not only accelerated the flow of resources from the Global South to the Global North, but also environmental destruction. The adoption of the neo-liberal framework as ‘international development policy’ by the International Monetary Fund led to the top down endorsement of neo-liberalism as the mantra for Southern economies that aim to move towards macro-economic stability and trade liberalization, in the hope of achieving consistent economic growth, which is indicative of ‘development’(Jucker, 2004).

In this way, sustainable development, through mechanisms of a market driven model, has come to be presented as ‘a new “sorcerer’s stone” that will solve all of humanity’s problems and not just those faced by education’ (González-Gaudiano, 2005, p. 248). For the UN, Sustainable Development is the overarching paradigm “for thinking about the future in which environmental, societal and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of an improved quality of life” (UNESCO, 2015). It is more popularly defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (IISD, 2018). Much like ESD, sustainable development as a concept suffers from a ‘definitional haziness’ that has facilitated its rise to a position of a consensus based ‘global agenda’ such as the SDGs.

Bonnett (1999) pertinently highlights this haziness and value judgments that surround the concept of ‘sustainability’ when coupled with notions of ‘development’ by pointing out the divergence around ‘what’ is to be sustained: sustainable economic growth, or the ‘balance of nature’/ecosystem, or human needs⁶? These diverging understandings of ‘sustainability’ lead to different policy implications that could indeed be incompatible with one another. For example, sustaining conditions for economic growth could actually undermine sustenance of natural eco-systems. The other interesting question Bonnett raises is: what *kind* of knowledge of sustainability is best to deal with the myriad of issues the concept entails? For example, has

⁶ ‘To meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland Commission, 1987).

the gendering of nature as female justified and validated the dominating stance humans have taken on the environment?

Selby and Kagawa (2010) also concur that, for the most part, “the key contribution of sustainable development has been to reinforce the dominance and sway of the occidental marketplace worldview” (p.38). In fact, they aptly characterize ESD as the latest and “thickest” manifestation of the “closing circle” of environmental education: a field incrementally infiltrated with often “highly questionable” global agendas (Selby & Kagawa, 2010, p.37).

Tracing the trajectory of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) from 2004-2014, Huckle and Wals (2015) astutely prove that the decade failed to challenge or acknowledge the hegemony of neo-liberalism as a force that blocked the transition towards ‘genuine sustainability’. The efforts made by the Rio+20 Education Working Group in 2012, who met in parallel to the official summit and drafted the paper ‘The Education We Need for the World We Want’ (TEWN), identified the climate crisis as one of greater magnitude than the “financial capital in its neoliberal phase” whereby interests of the capital and the economic analysis of the crisis are resulting in “global exhaustion”, increasing environmental and social injustice, and thus leading to social movements demanding ‘radical alternatives’ around ‘new forms of global citizenship’ (Huckle & Wals, 2015, p.492). The authors elucidate on TEWN’s identification of the global crisis as a crisis of education as well, noting that education today aims at reproducing “workers, consumers, and citizens” for the service of the market economy and urge for a better understanding of contestations in educational discourses towards environmental and social justice (p.493).

How does neo-liberalism espouse equity?

Having shown that ESD is indeed a concept embedded in neo-liberalism, I now turn to understandings of equity from a neo-liberal perspective. Then, in the following section, I scrutinize how these conceptions of equity are problematic for ESD.

(i) A ‘top-down’ equity

I apply Unterhalter’s (2009) conceptualizations of *equity from above*, *equity from the middle*, and *equity from bottom* in education to neo-liberalism. Unterhalter (2009) examines the evolution of the concept of equity in English and associates them with three forms of social relationships in society. She addresses *equity from below* as ‘reasonableness with people’ or “people’s access to powerful knowledge”, such as that of religion that governs people’s moral compass and attitudes towards each other through tolerance, respect, and fairness (p.417). Within the space of education, equity from below can be understood to be aligned with Amartya Sen’s (2009) ‘deliberative democracy’ which emphasizes people’s agency, their heterogeneity and unique identities, and social conditions that foster these characteristics – a ‘space of negotiations’ – where all views are considered equal and valuable. *Equity from above* is derived from law-making during the sixteenth century, which marked a period of conflict

between the King and the Church. This equity from above is also resonated in Rawls' social contract (Rawls, 2009), to be understood as the *law*, associated with ideas of rights and fairness that could be recognized in a court (Unterhalter, 2009, p.419). In education, equity from above plays out as having rights to free primary education, or rules for fair pay for teachers. When equity from above is exercised supra-nationally (such as UN Conventions), it has less juridical weight as those applied nationally as there is no legal obligation for nations to guarantee this equity. Finally, *equity from the middle* is derived from the market, associated with the emergence of capitalism, and characterized by flow of resources – land, money, and so on. Within education, equity from the middle would relate to the movement of resources such as ideas, time, money, skill, organization or artefacts that facilitates 'investments' in learning. It is the social arrangement that adds worth to the money – such as investment in teacher training, schoolbooks, and school fees – and contribute to "efficiency" (Unterhalter, 2009, p.420). For education to be fully equitable, all three forms of equity must be engaged and actualized.

Applying these three forms of equity to our discussion, I assert that neo-liberal conceptions of equity with regard to sustainable development engage only with equity from above and equity from the middle. The existence of the UN SDGs that wish to 'leave no one behind' and work towards an overall 'development' agenda are reflective of an equity from above, as are national policies reflecting the SDG agenda. The flow of resources for the implementation of the SDGs characterized by investment into tools for ESD such as conferences, environmental and development project grants, changes in curriculum reflecting ESD can be understood as equity from the middle. In that regard, equity from the bottom could be understood as the space for negotiation on sustainable development or ESD that is accessible to all individuals and communities, where all values are considered equal and valuable and where every being's agency is recognized. The pertinent identification of "closing circle" by Selby & Kagawa (2010) in ESD is proof of the fact that equity from the bottom is nowhere in sight. The ESD discourse in its current form willfully neglects tensions existing in the sustainable development discourse or alternate conceptions of sustainability offered by environmental and social movements, ecofeminism, and Indigenous literatures, amongst others.

(ii) Economic growth promises equity

In the neo-liberal framework, as economies 'grow' by following the aforementioned international development policy guidelines, so would their financial capital⁷, and thus economic wealth would trickle downwards to individuals leading to social equity (Bonnett, 1999). Thus, increase in economic wealth of nations is considered to lead to an increase in social and economic equity. Here social equity is largely also understood as increased per capita income and standards of living. However, if social equity is to be understood as the welfare of the poorest, imperfect market conditions could in fact create further inequity in 'developing' countries (Duflo, 2011). The above conceptualization of social equity through

⁷ At the cost of the country's natural capital.

economic growth is also problematic in that it assumes the right to unrestricted exploitation of resources for consumption by states, and as an extension by individuals, to achieve this economic growth. There is in fact an emerging field of economic ‘de-growth’ that is working towards contestations of traditional growth models and advocating for slowing down economic growth to achieve ecological sustainability and climate justice (see Hickel & Kallis, 2019; Schneider et al., 2010).⁸

(iii) Equity as distribution of resources

Aptly highlighted by Kopnina and Cherniak (2016), equity in relation to sustainable development is mostly as ‘fair distribution of resources’ in the market economy. In environmental and social policymaking as well, equity relates to the distribution of welfare goods and life chances in national, international, and intergenerational contexts (Murphy, 2012). In international climate change negotiations, equity is typically associated with the equitable distribution of the global mitigation target between nations, operationalized through the notion of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’ (Dubash, 2019). This predominant conceptualization has allowed nature to be reduced to a resource for human consumption. Since neoliberalism considers greater consumption indicative of a growing economy, it has led to an exploitative consumption of finite ‘natural’ resources.

Why is neo-liberal equity problematic for ESD?

I now argue that the narrow conceptualizations of equity within the neo-liberal literature do not allow for ESD to become the ‘holistic and transformational’ education it had set out to be for two reasons. First, neoliberal ideas of equity promote an exploitative anthropocentrism. Second, these ideas neglect Unterhalter’s (2009) ‘equity from the bottom’.

(i) Promotes exploitative anthropocentrism

The first problem is that of the dominance of exploitative anthropocentrism within neo-liberal literature. Central to the discussion around sustainability is the notion of the ‘Anthropocene’. The Anthropocene is understood as the geological epoch starting 1784 during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment (Crutzen, 2006), and is also referred to as the ‘age of the human’ (Kinkela, 2019). Thinking along the lines of the Anthropocene deepens the understanding of the intertwined ecological and human systems, and thus the ‘co-evolving fates’ of sustainability and equity (Leach et al., 2018). Anthropocentrism, to that end, is principally “the belief that value is human-centered and that all other beings are means to human ends” (Kopnina et al., 2018, p. 109). Equity, in its conceptualization as top-down, distributive, and economic growth oriented, legitimizes an

⁸ Due to the limited scope of the essay and its conceptual engagement with ESD, I am not covering the de-growth literature.

exploitative anthropocentric consumption of the environment and a consumerist attitude. Rather, as Bonnett (1999) argues, equity and economy are contained within nature. This line of thinking is clearly in conflict with the dominant neoliberal and humanist discourses which prime the human (the ‘modern man’) as an outside force presiding over nature, entitled to dominate and conquer it (Bonnett, 1999). Hence, sustainable development, which imbibes neo-liberal forms of equity, rather operationalizing into measures that *conserve* the environment, strives to find substitutes that still serve human interests. More dangerously, measurement of sustainable development typically uses indicators that still prioritize human satisfaction and capital accumulation, and thus, rather than enabling us to see the environment as an equal, portray nature as a resource to be exploited.

In this regard, ESD claiming to be a pluralistic education for environmental education is misrepresentative as it only presents a dominant view (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016). There is a need for ‘inclusive’ pluralism aptly identified by Kopnina and Cherniak (2016) that moves away from anthropocentrism and looks into both human and ‘more-than-human’ or environmental interests.

(ii) Neglects ‘equity from the bottom’

Applying Unterhalter’s conceptualization of equity, I showcased in the previous section that neo-liberal equity does not engage significantly with ‘equity from the bottom’ (Unterhalter, 2009). For ESD, equity from the bottom could be representative of marginalized sections of society towards whom ‘sustainable development’ is typically aimed. If ESD incorporates equity from the bottom, it could enable valuable participation and epistemic contribution from communities that are marginalized and silenced in other forms of education. In other words, equity from the bottom can be understood as a move towards an intersectional approach to ESD. The concept of intersectionality emerged from critical race theory to capture the specific experiences and discrimination faced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989), and has since been applied to other inquiries and movements including environmentalism and ecofeminism (see Kings, 2017; Osborne, 2015). Intersectionality aligns with the concept of ecojustice in that it advocates for a “social analysis of how different individuals and groups relate differently to climate change, due to their situatedness in power structures based on context-specific and dynamic social categorisations” (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014, p. 417).

One example of achieving ‘equity from the bottom’ by using an intersectional approach to ESD would conceptualize it from the perspective of disability. While the movement for greater representation and inclusion of persons with disabilities is neither new nor unique to environmental or educational issues, Wolbring and Burke (2013) provide crucial insights when they analyze ESD through the lenses of Ability Studies and Disability Studies.⁹ Applying the

⁹ While both Ability studies and Disability Studies are interdisciplinary in nature, the key difference between the two is premised on the fact that Disability Studies attempts to challenge the individual deficit model that places the onus of being “disabled” on the person and believes medical intervention to be remedial (Wolbring & Burke, 2013, p. 2329). Ability Studies on the other hand, moves beyond body-related (physical and mental)

disability lens, the authors found persons with disabilities not only underrepresented in the ESD discourse, but also less visible than other marginalized social groups, pointing towards the invisibility being both systemic and unacknowledged. In fact, the authors note that “of the 17,000 articles showing up in Google scholar with the keyword ‘education for sustainable development’ less than 40 articles were found when the search term ‘disabled people’ was added and less than 60 when the search term ‘people with disabilities’ was used” (Wolbring & Burke, 2013, p.2329). Applying the Ability lens led to the realization that there exists no consensus on three fronts: which abilities should be taught through ESD, which abilities are needed to teach ESD, and which abilities are needed to learn from ESD. The contributions of disability specialists to the ESD discourse could be substantial in terms of ability expectations discourse, in particular to creating a ‘taxonomy’ currently existing, missing, and therefore needed in the ESD discourse (Wolbring & Burke, 2013, p.2336). Thus, incorporating a disability lens into ESD could only enrich the discourse and thus take a first step towards becoming ‘transformational’ in terms of an education that is inclusive.

While I took the example of how ESD could become a more inclusive concept and area of practice for persons with disabilities, the same would apply for other marginalized groups. Engagement with equity from the bottom would therefore also imply an understanding of equity as social inclusion and provide a ‘space of negotiation’ or a forum that will equalize how diverse communities and knowledge groups can contribute to ESD. Equity from the bottom thus also means a genuine approach to intersectionality within environmental education by engaging with alternative literatures such as eco-feminist, Indigenous, social justice, non-violence and peace literature amongst others.

Re-imagining Equity in ESD

As explored in the previous section, neo-liberal engagement with equity restricts the potential of ESD to be truly equitable. In this section, I engage with two intersectional concepts that I advocate will bring a more nuanced understanding of equity, as *equity from the bottom*, into the ESD discourse: (i) *reflexivity: the ‘good life’ & the environment*; (ii) *eco-justice: an education for the environment*.

At the outset, I acknowledge that a re-conceptualization of ESD to be ‘holistic and transformational’ in the delivery of equity requires a paradigm shift outside the neo-liberalism discourse. Thus, ‘intentional language framing’ is an essential component of the re-conceptualization, as a refusal to accept the integration of ecology/environment, economy, and equity in sustainable development (Cachelin et al., 2015).

ability expectation to investigate which emotional and social abilities (“competitiveness, ability to consume, being productive, being able to live in harmony with nature”) are considered “essential” in a given context and situation, as also the dynamics of reaching consensus on ability expectations, and the consequent impact of ability expectations (Wolbring & Burke, 2013, p. 2329).

Reflexivity: Sustainability as a Frame of Mind

For Heila Lotz-Sisitka (2010), reflexivity entails being “simultaneously critically transnational and globally reflexive while also supporting situated social learning processes that are contextually located and oriented towards agency, capability, and risk negotiation in the everyday” (p.87). Despite its globalism, responsibility for leading action on climate change gets deflected by the Westphalian system onto nations, which further misrepresent it as problem of efficiency and redistribution of resources (Lotz-Sisitka, 2010). Rather, ideas of *sufficiency* and *equity* should guide critical, reflexive, and deliberate engagement with environmental issues – in terms of an understanding of its nature and impacts.

Reflexivity could also guide a re-evaluation of our own relationship with the environment, with the aim of cultivating a mutually sustaining and equitable relationship, on a par with the human relationships we value. Sustainability, Bonnett (1999) reasons, should not just be a policy but a *frame of mind*. Sustainability as a frame of mind entails reflecting on our relationship with the environment– is it one of respect or of power? If the latter is the case – as it is for most humans living a highly urbanized lifestyle – what can I do to improve this relationship? In turn, this approach to sustainability when applied to ‘development’ would enable us to envisage the term beyond the realm of economic growth by establishing sympathy with nature that is both material and psychological. Interestingly, Bonnett (1999) marks his reservation with including ‘democratic values’ such as equality, freedom, and justice in environmental education, claiming that discussions then imbibe the ‘social’ environment within the broader environment, and thus bring back an anthropocentric frame of mind. This is where I digress with Bonnett’s thought process in the next section, as I assert that a justice-oriented environmental education could actually serve the environment more purposely.

I also pay heed to Selby’s (2010) suggestion of reconceptualizing ESD as ‘Education for Sustainable Moderation’ and ‘Education for Sustainable Contraction’ rather than using the terminology of ‘development’ that gets lost in ‘growth speak’. Education for Sustainable Contraction espouses an alternative conception of ‘the good life’ to be shared which is based on the idea of sufficiency and resisting tendencies of consumerism. Learners would focus on partaking in community initiatives: learn about understanding seasonal variations and food production, community gardens, childcare centres, home redesigning, the diversity in forms of culture, storytelling and community narratives.

Education for sustainable moderation would focus on understanding excessive consumerism and materialism as a form of structural violence. Drawing upon Galtung’s (1969) work on structural violence, education for sustainable moderation would entail identifying how consumerist habits can exacerbate class inequalities, alienation, and oppression within society. Moreover, this education would engage anti-racist frameworks to understand the structural violence that nature faces, that is, when humans see themselves as a dominant species/race (Selby, 2010). Education for sustainable moderation would involve reflection about current

positionality as a consumer: how the consumer does not ‘see’ what is wrong with the consumerist lifestyle while being subsumed in it and when their own identity is tied to consumption of resources. Anti-consumerist education thus has twin goals of “protecting the ecosphere and ethnosphere, while liberating the individual from the thrall of consumerism for a journey of self-discovery and self- growth” (Selby, 2011, p. 7). This education would expose the learner to alternative, non-consumerist ways of being, including slow-growth and no-growth economies.

Eco-justice Education

I also argue for reconceptualizing ESD as eco-justice education: an education that demands justice *for* the environment, rather than merely teaches learners *about* the environment. Cachelin et al. (2015) call for language and discourse to be considered necessary components as grounds for change if sustainability is to take root. I thus argue that the vocabulary of ‘justice’ is less interpretative and therefore ‘stronger’ or more meaningful than ESD whose definitional shortcomings I have unpacked in previous sections, in that it raises the question of ‘justice for what?’ or ‘justice for whom?’ This questioning in turn enables us to think about the current injustices in its varied forms – injustices of the development and environmental discourse towards certain social groups as well as injustices towards the environment. One may argue that moving towards a justice-oriented interpretation of equity in relation to ESD is prescriptive in nature. To this line of thought, I would respond that in a time of a climate ‘emergency’, we are at a point of no return. As educationists, we need to look within, reflect on our relationship with nature, and call out the fallacies of anthropocentrism that thrive on hegemony both over nature and marginalized humans.

I understand eco-justice education as a process of ‘unlearning’ – enabling learners to take a step back and critically assess what surrounds us, the ideologies and experiences we have been shaped by. This understanding is broadly aligned with that of ESD as a transformational education enabling behavioral change in learners towards positive environmental action. However, I stress that the vocabulary of ecojustice is important in voicing the importance of addressing current injustices through education. I elucidate on a short discussion of educational parameters set out by Jucker (2004) to transition (from ESD) to an eco-justice education. Firstly, eco-justice education emphasizes the need for educators to not be prescriptive nor attempt to impose a particular kind of ‘naturalised’ knowledge on learners (Jucker, 2004). A pre-requisite for learners is thus to be willing to change their own lifestyles, educate themselves on ecojustice before engaging with learners as catalysts for discussions to re-evaluate human values and practices. Secondly, eco-justice education is premised in lived situations as opposed to waiting for global changes, international agreements, and summits to happen. It exposes learners to the ‘messy reality’ and complicated nature of issues and not giving them a watered-down version (Jucker, 2004). It also entails connecting learning to a place where students have the opportunity to undertake action.¹⁰ Finally, in terms of competencies, eco-justice education

¹⁰ Based on the assumption that environmental awareness does not unnecessarily lead to sustainable action.

hopes to develop critical thinking, particularly to enable learners to see through and beyond dominant ideologies, apply inter and trans disciplinarity, analyze the inequity between the global North and South, experience community-centered non-monetized relationships. Ecojustice education thus enables a ‘systemic’ learning but also one that enables learners to develop a reflective distance to understand how the system works.

Bonnett’s (2004) post-humanist discourse fits well into eco-justice education as it attempts to give a ‘voice’ to the environment. Post-humanism advocates for a stronger voice and rights for the environment. It affords a conception of Earth as an ecosystem in which humans co-exist symbiotically with nature and not as its consumers. Bonnett (1999) emphasizes the need for discussing systemic causes behind the environmental issues rather than symptoms such as pollution and depletion of resources as an important component of ESD. This would add an essential ‘discomforting’ element within environmental education that would lead learners to question rather than accept (Bonnett, 1999).

The post-humanist, more-than-human discourse is one that is worth exploring as it broadens the idea of equity to the environment vis-à-vis humans. The post-humanist discourse within environmental literature is still developing, and I would hope that it does not tend to ‘universalize’ debates at the cost of humanist discourses that voice marginalized groups such as anti-racist literature, post-colonial literature and so on. However, the potential of the post-humanist discourse lies in its ability to magnify the thinking around equity and justice *for* the environment as an end in itself, and for that, it is worthy of exploration.

Moving Forward :Conclusion and Thoughts

The discourse of Sustainable Development Goals is one that promises a brighter, more just and equitable future by ‘leaving no one behind’, and which identifies education as a tool for reaching this future. While I could argue that the idea of using education as a tool for a larger goal is problematic in itself, I deemed it equally important to assess whether that tool in its current form is fit for purpose. It was with this thought in mind that I decided to engage with the idea of Education for Sustainable Development. While there exists a significant amount of academic and grey literature on the implementation of ESD through national and regional programs, and also on the overall politics of ESD and sustainable development, very little critical work exists examining ESD as a conceptualization that addresses equity. The lack of a critical focus on equity within ESD is reflective of its unproblematized acceptance within the development agenda, much like sustainable development. However, any notion that is multifaceted but goes unproblematized deserves critical reflection.

In this paper, therefore, I have attempted to showcase that both ESD and sustainable development are entrenched within the same hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism that maintains its dominion by being flexible enough to subsume other concepts such as equity and justice. Thus, reconceptualization of any notion entrenched in the all-encompassing ideology of neo-liberalism requires a paradigm shift with radical alternate theories that would resist co-

option into the neoliberal framework. For this reconceptualization of ESD, I decided on two intersectional themes that broaden the parent notion of equity that ESD furthers. The first was the idea of *reflexivity* in that we need to reflect on our relationship with nature and find mutually sustaining ways to foster the relationship just as one would with the human relationships one values. This thinking in itself would mark a paradigm shift out of an exploitative anthropocentrism to think of the environment and us as equal parts of a larger ecosystem. In other ways, sustainability would become a frame of mind, while the ideas of sufficiency rather than consumerism would guide how individuals define a ‘good life’. The second reconceptualization involves an *eco-justice* education rather than ESD, as the language framing of eco-justice clarifies that it is an education *for* the environment. By that, I mean that the main beneficiary of this education would be the environment since eco-justice education aims at developing a stronger voice *of* the environment. Eco-justice education fosters critical learners to re-evaluate the world around them, question experiences and ideologies they have been shaped by, and engage in ‘situated learning’.

As evident through the discussion of its evolution and multiple definitions, ESD is a broad and elusive concept that could benefit from further critical engagement at many levels. The possibilities for ESD and the broader field of environmental education to become more equitable are copious, embedded in undertaking intersectionality as an approach, and potentially transforming education through the synergies that arise.

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