

## **The Role of the Human Dimension in Promoting Education for Sustainable Development**

*The interaction of Humanism values and Holism values as a necessary driving force of the Education for Sustainable Development*

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### **Abstract**

More than ever, the world needs Education for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets are at the core of the 2030 Agenda. Their scope and ambition have been strengthened in relation with the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. The three dimensions of Sustainable Development (environmental, social, economic) are now integrated in a transversal way. The Objectives meet all the challenges of Sustainable Development, such as climate, biodiversity, energy, water but also poverty, gender equality, economic prosperity, peace, agriculture, and education.

### **Key Words**

human values; holism; education for sustainable development; regional level

### **Abstrakt**

Svět více než kdy jindy potřebuje vzdělávání pro udržitelný rozvoj. Jádrem Agendy 2030 je 17 cílů udržitelného rozvoje a jejich 169 úkolů. Jejich rozsah a ambice byly posíleny v porovnání s Rozvojovými cíli tisíciletí přijatými v roce 2000. Tři rozměry udržitelného rozvoje (environmentální, sociální a ekonomický) jsou nyní integrovány průřezově. Cíle reagují na všechny výzvy udržitelného rozvoje, jako jsou klima, biologická rozmanitost, energie, voda, ale také chudoba, rovnost žen a mužů, hospodářská prosperita, mír, zemědělství a vzdělávání.

### **Klíčová slova**

lidské hodnoty; holismus; vzdělávání pro udržitelný rozvoj; regionální úroveň

*Education is not a preparation for life,*

*it is life itself (John Dewey)*

## **Introduction**

More than ever, the world needs Education for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets are at the core of the 2030 Agenda. Their scope and ambition have been strengthened in relation with the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. The three dimensions of Sustainable Development (environmental, social, economic) are now integrated in a transversal way. The Objectives meet all the challenges of Sustainable Development, such as climate, biodiversity, energy, water but also poverty, gender equality, economic prosperity, peace, agriculture, and education.

The role of human dimension in promoting Education for Sustainable Development at the regional level is an important issue. It is necessary to consider first how Education for Sustainable Development fits into the institutionalized education system since it is now included in all teaching programs: in the primary schools, in the secondary schools, and in the general, technological and vocational high schools. Relayed by the European authorities, then by States, the requirements towards universities have gradually increased, so that higher institutions had also to open the way, through ESD, for the implementation of Sustainable Development.

In order to fully understand how this integration is carried out, and to study the place and role of the human dimension in promoting Education for Sustainable Development, it is necessary to define the specific status of ESD in the National Education system.

## **The specificity of Education for Sustainable Development in the National Education system**

As part of their study on the "Educations for" published under the title: "Educations for", a change in educational logic? The example of Education for Sustainable Development at university », Angela Barthes and Yves Alpe have studied the specificity of Education for Sustainable Development in relation to the principles of the national Education system.

Their article explains that ESD is positioned between knowledge and practices. It does not have the usual characteristics of school and university teachings: ESD belongs to the group of the "Educations for", of which it has most of its characteristics, namely:

- an interconnection of issues, both from an educational point of view (focus on life experiences, acquisition of different skills), and from a societal point of view (a close relationship between environmental, health, social and economic issues);
- specific educational approaches that highlight their educational aspect and not their subjugation to utilitarian aims;
- the decisive and involved place of the subject in its social dimension, both for pupils and teachers;
- and also the place of its values and representation-knowledge systems.

ESD has therefore a special status:

- it is thematic (the Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals), and different from the conventional academic scientific contents;
- it is closely related to social pressing issues in society, and, at the same time, is responding to a kind of social demand for education;
- It gives an important place to values: "ESD must train in a scientific and prospective approach, allowing each citizen to make his own choices and commitments by basing them on a lucid and enlightened thinking. It should also lead to a thinking on values, on an awareness of individual and collective responsibilities, and on the necessary solidarity between territories, intra and intergenerational" (circular 2007-077, Ministry of National Education – France).
- UNESCO has published a "collection of good practices - education for sustainable development" which specifies (p. 7): "education is an essential instrument for changing values and attitudes, behaviors and ways of life by making them consistent with sustainable development."

The specificity of ESD having been defined, let us study how its integration into the national conventional education system, governed by its own founding principles, makes it possible to precise the human dimension role in this new mode of education, the aim of which being to transform society.

### **The integration of Education for Sustainable Development into the existing education system: new humanist principles of education**

Responding to UNESCO guidelines - according to which, among other things, Education for Sustainable Development empowers learners to make informed decisions and undertake responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a fair society for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity - Sustainable Development has been adopted in France by the Minister responsible for National Education, in its classic meaning, as being a process of restoring dynamic balances between the environment, the social world, the economy, and culture. Starting from this definition based on the interaction between these different fields, education for sustainable development is therefore a transversal education which integrates the challenges of sustainable development in the new teaching programs of the primary schools, of the secondary schools, and in the new programs of the general, technological and vocational high schools. In addition, ESD is obliged to interact with other transversal educations, as education for development and international solidarity, health education, artistic and cultural education.

As a result, a fundamental change in the goals of our education systems has taken place: they no longer consist only in training citizens able to meet the needs of the production society, but, by becoming aware of the relationships between the environmental, economic, social and cultural issues, they help students to better understand the challenges of sustainable development, as defined by UNESCO, i.e.:

- the interdependence of human societies and the Earth system,
- the need to make informed and responsible choices as well as to adopt behaviors that take these balances into consideration,
- and, finally, the importance of a global scale solidarity, so as to act later as responsible citizens.

In these conditions, we can speak of new humanist principles of education, the human dimension being at the center of this new vision of education, which defines an ethics having for determinant of all actions, all achievements and all laws, all that is good for human beings, and, at the same time, good for humanity envisaged as a whole, and for its future. From this perspective, all acts must have a human purpose. The new educational programs are therefore the essential condition for an evolution of humanity in the direction of an enlightened humanism having to train citizens not only free and equal in rights but also aware of planetary challenges.

The notion of consciousness is primordial, as the French humanist philosopher Rabelais wrote it in « *Pantagruel* », (1532): "*Science without consciousness is nothing but the ruin of the soul*". This aphorism, frequently glossed over but still valid nowadays, is putting the human dimension at the center of education, and over all at the heart of Education for Sustainable Development. According to the principles of a humanist education defined by the founders that were Montaigne (1533-1592) and Rabelais (1483-1553), French humanists, and Erasmus (1469-1536), Dutch humanist, the accumulation of knowledge, linked to memorization, should not be an end in itself, it must be used for thinking, leading to the understanding of the contents in terms of learning and to the development of a critical thinking, and it must also take into consideration the deepest inner values of the individuals in order to put them at the others' service. So, for humanists, starting from an education centered on sciences and on the knowledge of the human being, with an opening on philosophical thoughts and arts, leads to the training of free citizens, equal in rights, and aware of a brotherhood as human beings.

Furthermore, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher, (1712-1778) has allowed a broadening of humanist educational principles in his book: « *Emile or education* » (1762): the learner's senses must be called upon by learning situations. The pupil must experiment, feel, touch, manipulate, and therefore be involved in his own education, which must not remain only intellectual. It is why we may consider Rousseau as one of the first theorists of holistic ideas applicable to education.

### **The integration of ESD into the existing education system; John Locke's contribution: a Holistic approach of Education**

John Locke (1632-1704) explains in his book: « *Some thoughts concerning Education* » (1693) that education must take into account, at the same time, the development of the intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potential of everyone. Like humanistic education, the holistic approach seeks to involve the learner in the teaching and learning process, and encourages personal responsibility; but holistic education encourages collective responsibility at the same time, insofar as the learner is envisaged in all the aspects that constitute his being. This approach of education is additional to the humanistic education because it is not limited to consider only some elements of the learner's experiences.

This concept of education, which existed in ancient Greece and other indigenous cultures, implies the philosophical idea that the world is a whole, and that learning cannot be separated from all human experiences. This "Holistic Education" denomination has been attributed to the South African military leader, who has been a statesman, a scholar and a philosopher: Marshal General Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870-1950), known for his role in the Society of Nations formation and in the international peace organization formation, the United Nations. It is interesting to remind that in his book « *Holism and Evolution* » (1926) Smuts describes "holism" as the tendency of nature to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the parts through creative evolution. Today, this work is recognized as the basic theory for the systemic thinking, the complexity theory, the neural networks, holistic education, and general systems theory in ecology.

The holistic approach strategies in education are different from the humanistic ones, because the idea of Holism implies a transformative approach of learning. Compared to traditional education resulting from humanist education, focused on the transmission of knowledge as well as on the development of capacities and skills, holistic education is a transformative learning which involves a change of the learner's reference frameworks because it can include points of view, habits of mind and a vision of the world which broaden his personal point of view and his life framework. The introduction of Education for Sustainable Development in the institutional education system enables that.

Nowadays, further to the introduction of ESD in primary school, the young children are developing very early a vision of the world that they would not have without it. All young children know that plastic is polluting the seas and oceans, that paper must be recycled to limit the slaughter of trees, that electricity must be turned off when leaving a classroom, that nature must be respected, and so on.

In our region, children have seen seabirds on beaches, stuck in fuel oil after an oil tanker had sunk at sea, and they were the first to ask for helping people to collect the birds in cardboard boxes and carry them to the veterinary centers that had been set up. Their love and compassion for seabirds drove them there, and they had given their games up to participate in their rescue. Thus, not only do the children adopt a responsible behavior very early, but they also put into action what their heart urged them to do. We could give many examples.

ESD, therefore, allows the child to care about the world around him, according to the degree of vision he may have of it: it is, indeed, a transformative education. Knowledge is opening his mind, but ESD appeals to his emotions and sensitivity. As watching, on a video, children of same age in some poor country, filling water bottles in puddles formed after the rain to bring them to school for cooking their lunch rice, the young child is moved, and that awakens his own desire to help to change things, as he grows up, whether his sensibility, his will, and his sense of empathy still motivate him sufficiently. Because acting needs motivation. So, Descartes' precept: "I think therefore I am" becomes, with ESD: "I think, therefore I act".

In the meantime, the video would have sensitized the child to the wider problem of water supply in countries where the climate is so extreme that the search for drinking water is conditioning the inhabitants' daily life.

### **The interaction between the humanist approach and the holistic approach: a transversality which allows human values to be exercised more.**

In the perspective of the 2030 Agenda, school curricula have been reviewed and refined, and if awareness of natural disasters linked to climate change is the main point of ESD in primary classes, the approach in secondary teaching is scientific; it is based, first of all, on observation - the starting point of the scientific approach - then it is centered on the need to make the learners develop a rational attitude in their approach to environmental issues, these aspects of education having to allow a structured construction around thematic poles at the crossroads of scientific, artistic and literary discourses, while their sensitive relationship to the world is developing, and that the need for systemic approaches to major planetary challenges is demonstrated.

In addition, the interdisciplinarity required by systemic analysis opens the way for learners to understand the relationships between environmental, economic, social and cultural issues, which enable them to make informed and responsible choices, and to adopt behaviors that take these balances into account, but also to understand the interdependence of societies and the Earth system, as well as the importance of solidarity on a global scale. From this perspective, human values are

engaged, and learners understand the necessity to change and to adopt some degree of personal or social transformation.

Thus, to the fundamental skills of observation, thinking, research and critical analysis developed by the humanist approach in education, the holistic approach of ESD allows a collaborative decision-making and the sense of responsibilities for present and future generations. Great is the interest of having integrated into the institutional education system the capital issues of the climate emergency, biodiversity, natural disasters, risk reduction, and sustainable consumption and production.

But if the human value of integrating ESD in the official educational programs no longer needs to be demonstrated, we can say that this one is also enriched by the knowledge of the humanist principles given by the 16th century great philosophers, and those given by the great philosophers of the 18th century, « the Century of Enlightenment », who, thanks to their ideas, allowed deep changes in society over the centuries. Among these philosophers of the Enlightenment, Rousseau having already been mentioned, let us quote Voltaire (1694–1778) who, in his time, was engaged in a fight in favor of political and social reforms and who, in his philosophical tales, specifically in *Candide*, (1759) is denouncing injustices, intolerance, obscurantism, cruelty, war, slavery and the triangular trade. Montesquieu (1689-1755) also denounced slavery, abolished in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), an American statesman. Diderot (1713–1784), had also exalted the Spirit of the Enlightenment and the “efforts of the human spirit” in his « *Encyclopedia* » written with d'Alembert (1751-1772), in order to struggle against ignorance.

Furthermore, very important historical founding documents have played a preponderant role in the destiny of peoples, and have to be studied, like « *the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* », in 1789, during the French Revolution, or the « *Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* », written by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) in 1774 and signed on August 2, 1776, or « *the American Constitution of 1787* », written by 55 people. All these texts agree in declaring that men “are born and remain free and equal in rights”, these rights being considered “natural, inalienable, and sacred”.

Studying the great philosophical texts and the striking declarations of History are developing skills of understanding and interpretation, making it possible to fight against prejudices, to develop moral judgment, to open the mind, to strengthen the social sense, all these values being necessary in Education for Sustainable Development, otherwise it would be just one more learning, coexisting with the other learnings. Consequently, it is the systemic interaction between institutional knowledge and Education for Sustainable Development that makes it possible to understand the world of nowadays, in order to allow it to evolve.

Moreover, the French *Environmental Charter* - drawn up after a national consultation led by a commission chaired by Yves Coppens, a paleontologist - has been adopted by Parliament in June 2004. It received a constitutional value by being incorporated into the preamble of the French Constitution by the constitutional law of March 1st, 2005. It is the testimony of the new fight to be led in order to preserve the great ecological balances of the planet, while allowing the continuation of a development necessary for the well-being of present and future generations.

## Conclusion

Therefore, it is possible to promote Education for Sustainable Development through the interaction of the Humanist Education values, the Holistic education values, and the new human values implied by Education for Sustainable Development, namely a globality of the world and a globality of the individual, these values being not distinct from each other; on the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing. The necessary political, economic and social consciousness, essential to understand the present world, can only be broadened by the realization that man is in the process

of becoming a “citizen of the world” who, according to the definition of UNESCO, “...takes its commitments and plays an active role at the local and global level”, in order to meet all the planetary challenges, and create a truly more sustainable world, fairer, more equitable, more tolerant, more united, more peaceful, and regenerative of environment.

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