Education and the Problems of Sustainable Development[1]

Edukacja a Problemy Ekorozwoju

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Abstract

Education for sustainable development has not featured strongly in the discourse promoted by the journal, *Problemy Ekorozwoju/Problems of Sustainable Development*. This paper provides a brief background to environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) and focuses on the theorization and pedagogies appropriate for ESD if perceived as transformative and political education. The obstacles that stand in the path of education for sustainable development are overviewed, and an attempt is made to suggest key questions that may underpin a transformative curriculum of education for sustainable development. It is hoped that the paper encourages further discussion in *Problemy Ekorozwoju* of issues around education for sustainable development.

Key words: environmental education; education for sustainable development; discourse; critical curriculum theorization; ideology.

Streszczenie

Jak dotąd, problematyka edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju nie gościła zbyt często w czasopiśmie *Problemy Ekorozwoju/Problems of Sustainable Development*. Ten artykuł prezentuje podstawy zarówno edukacji środowiskowej (EE – environmental education), jak i edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju (ESD – education for sustainable development). Szczególny nacisk położono na aspekty teoretyczne i pedagogiczne właściwe dla podejścia, w ramach którego edukację dla rozwoju zrównoważonego postrzegamy jako dokonującą zmian i polityczną. Przedstawiono przeszkody dla tak rozumianej edukacji. Podjęto także próbę sformułowania kluczowych pytań, które wspierałyby przełomowy program edukacji dla zrównoważonego rozwoju. Miejmy nadzieję, że niniejszy artykuł przyczyni się do szerszej dyskusji na temat zrównoważonej edukacji.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja środowiskowa, edukacja dla zrównoważonego rozwoju, dysputa, krytyczna teoretyzacja programu, ideologia

*… it takes a lot of things to change the world:
Anger and tenacity. Science and imagination,
The quick initiative, the long reflection,
The cold patience and the infinite perseverance,
The understanding of the particular case and the
understanding of the ensemble:
Only the lessons of reality can teach us to transform reality*
Bertolt Brecht, *Einverständnis*

Introduction

The concept of sustainable development, formalised in the report, *Our Common Future* (The Brundtland Report, WCED, 1987), has stirred up fierce contestation over the last three decades, as might be expected of an attempt to fuse the concept of sustainability with the practices of development. The Brundtland Report's needs-based definition of sustainable

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[1] This paper draws on previous publications by the author, in particular, Springett, D.V., 2010 and Springett, D.V., 2015.

development *(development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs)* has entrenched within it the dynamic connection between social and environmental responsibility and harks back to the conception of the environmental problematic held to as part of the *environmental revolution* of the 1960s/1970s. The urgency of the sustainable development agenda requires a radical re-think of societal priorities, but the ideological struggle implicit in the concept, the contradictions embedded in it, are seen by some as too profound and too political to be resolvable – an *oxymoron* (The Ecologist, 1993, Rich, 1994), and a *dangerous liaison* (Sachs, 1993). It has been denounced as a cynical attempt to construct a *green cover* for business-as-usual and the ongoing exploitation of people and resources – a political façade for otherwise unacceptable corporate practices (Willers, 1994; Adams, 1995; Escobar, 1995; Paehlke, 1999). Indeed, the concept has become colonised by business, giving rise to the discourse of corporate social responsibility (CSR), now a powerful, even overpowering, strand in the sustainable development debate, characterised by Levy (1997) as an exercise in *political sustainability*. Some have advanced arguments in favour of dispensing with the term *sustainable development* altogether on account of its *vacuity* and *malleability* (Lélé, 1991; Sneddon, 2000) and its lack of *objective analysis* (Reboratti, 1999). Others perceive the concept as being political, radical and egalitarian, providing a *common currency* and bringing together conflicting vocabularies to a common though contested one (Jacobs, 1999). Sustainable development is, then, a vexed concept that attempts a balancing act across a deep ideological gap, an essentially political project that has given rise to a number of discourses that reflect the different interests struggling to maintain hegemony or to attain a voice. Dobers and Springett (2010) observe that discourses are, by their nature, problematic and contestable, open to interpretation and reinterpretation and governed by the motives and goals of those who develop the discourse. According to Foucault (1977), discourses are constitutive and productive: they construct reality. They are political and may be used to foster or legitimate particular interests, placing these beyond question and normalizing what is, in fact, contingent (Foucault, 1977). As Kureishi (2003) has put it: *After they've been told for a while, stories can turn into politics, into our institutions, and it is important that they seem just the way things are, and the way they have to go on being* (Kureishi, 2003). The contestation around sustainable development calls for a stronger role for discursive democracy (Dryzek, 1994) and education has been perceived

as the way of promoting the discourse and action that this requires.

The role of education

If we accept that discourses are *constitutive* and *productive*, that they construct reality, legitimating powerful interests and normalizing what might not, in fact, be good for people or for nature, then the role of education steps centre stage as a chief means of addressing the institutional, economic, social and environmental imperatives of sustainable development: a powerful tool to foster knowledge and understanding, to develop agency and to produce a new discourse. This may explain why it has proved a hard task to embed education for sustainable development securely in the curricula of schools and institutions of higher education. The earlier environmental movement emphasized the importance of education in helping people of all ages to understand the political causes of environmental problems and their interconnections with social problems. The environmental education movement arose as part of the popular, vernacular, quasi-communal style of community schooling in ecology, green lifestyles and intentional frugality that had also emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. This was linked to civil rights movements and the search for alternative life-styles, culminating in such initiatives as Earth Day and the establishment of the Club of Rome. As early as 1971, Commoner had underlined the political nature of the task in hand for educators, reminding us that: *The root cause of the crisis is not found in how men* [sic] *interact with nature, but in how they interact with each other; that to solve the environmental crisis we must solve the problem of poverty, racial injustice and war; that the debt to nature, which is the measure of the environmental crisis, cannot be paid person by person in recycled bottles or ecologically sound habits, but in the ancient coin of social justice*. These social movements and the concerns they raised, along with publications such as Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Ward's *Spaceship Earth* (1966), helped to invigorate the environmental education movement (Springett, 2015)[2].

Environmental education/EE was also fostered by the new Environmental Education Associations that sprang up and by intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, UNESCO and UNEP and the IUCN. By 1969, a definition of environmental education was provided in the first issue of *The Journal of Environmental Education*:

Environmental education is aimed at producing a citizenry that is knowledgeable concerning the bio-

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[2] Buckminster Fuller's *World Game*, 1961, Stewart Brand's *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, 1968-1972, and Paolo Soleri's *arcologies* are other possible precursors of the formal environmental education movement.

physical environment and its associated problems, aware of how to solve these problems, and motivated to work toward their solution (Stapp, 1969).

By 1971, the IUCN had issued the first internationally accepted definition of environmental education: *the process of recognizing values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the interrelatedness among man* [sic]*, his culture and his biophysical surroundings. EE also entails practice in decision-making and self-formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality* (IUCN, 1971).

In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) produced the Stockholm Declaration *to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment* and established the International Environmental Education Programme, coordinated by UNESCO and UNEP. The UNESCO-UNEP conference held in Belgrade in 1974 delivered the *Belgrade Charter*, based on the *Stockholm Declaration*, and set up international and regional meetings on environmental education that culminated in the International Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, held in Tbilisi in 1977. The *Tbilisi Declaration* provided goals, aims, objectives and guiding principles that already signalled the need for a transformative education. The focus was on education that would:

- foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social and political interdependence in urban and rural areas;
- provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills needed to protect and improve the environment; and,
- create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups and society as a whole toward the environment (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978, p. 3).

A major outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992), which was based on the WCED outcomes, was *Agenda 21*, a blueprint for the future. Chapter 36 focuses on the role of education as a means of implementing the goals of *Agenda 21*, emphasizing that: *Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues (…). It is critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making.* (UNCED 1992, Chapter 36, p. 2).

However, as Springett notes (2015), it was the NGO *Alternative Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility*,

presented at the Global Forum, in 1992 – the alternative Earth Summit – that provided a more explicitly critical and transformational set of principles. It brought a strong and open values position to the debate, calling for profound institutional change that would challenge the dominant social paradigm. It called for inclusive and participatory education at all levels, delivered through programmes that are holistic and systemic in approach and that take an inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary stance, and are critical in their theorization. Its comprehensive goals come close to Huckle's ideal of *concrete utopianism* in education (2012) and include:

- Environmental education, whether formal, non-formal or informal, should be grounded in *critical and innovative thinking* in any place or time, *promoting the transformation and construction of society.*
- Environmental education is both individual and collective. It aims to develop *local and global citizenship with respect for self-determination and the sovereignty of nations.*
- Environmental education is not neutral but *is values based*. It is *an act for social transformation.*
- Environmental education must stimulate *solidarity, equality, and respect for human rights involving democratic strategies and an open climate of cultural interchange.*
- Environmental education should treat critical global issues, *their causes and interrelationships* in a systemic approach and within their social and historical contexts. Fundamental issues in relation to development and the environment, such as population, health, peace, human rights, democracy, hunger, degradation of flora and fauna, should be perceived in this manner (Emphasis added)[3].

Since UNCED, much energy has gone into promoting, practising and critiquing education for sustainable development, with continuing involvement from the UN, UNESCO, UNEP and the IUCN's Commission on Education and Communication (CEC). 2014 marked the end of the UN's *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (DESD). The major outcome of the DESD is the plan for a Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAPESD), with the overarching goal *to generate and scale-up action in all levels and areas of education and learning in order to accelerate progress towards sustainable development* (UNESCO 2013).

The goals comprise:
- Advancing policy;
- Transforming learning and training environments;

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[3] These can be can be accessed in full on: http://habitat.igc.org/treaties/at-05.htm.

- Building capacity of educators and trainers;
- Empowering and mobilizing youth;
- Accelerating sustainable solutions at the local level.

The scope of the *Global Action Programme* and the international involvement in preparing its goals appear impressive. However, there are questions about its implementation: Will structural and institutional impediments curtail its effectiveness? Will the GAPESD itself represent a form of institutional control over education for sustainable development, determining the social politics of how the ESD agenda is set? Robottom (2013, p.161) notes that the DESD *is marked by vigorous attempts to impose centrally developed curriculum packages designed for universal implementation*.

The earlier movement for environmental education had initially focused on education *about* the environment (providing information) and education *in* the environment (experiential education, such as Outdoor Education). Subsequently, activists advocated education *for* the environment (Sultana, 1989) and the importance of developing the political nature of environmental education with an understanding of the underlying causes of both environmental and social degradation. Huckle (2012), a leading educator and writer on environmental education and education for sustainability, has reminded us again, like Commoner over four decades ago, of the need to bring realism into education, tearing away the myths or evasions that sanitize much of our teaching and learning. The need to develop the political role of education *for* the environment became more pronounced after the Brundtland Report and the new focus on *sustainable development*. At the same time, the concept of *sustainable* development stirred divisions between educators who chose to focus on *education for sustainable development* (ESD) and those who preferred to advance *education for sustainability* (EfS) – largely on account of the *contradictions* innate in the concept of sustainable development. This paper focuses chiefly on education for sustainable development/ESD while taking account of the concerns of educators who prefer to focus on EfS (see Springett, 2010; 2015). The author's experience is in teaching at university level and providing courses for corporate staff. At this level, the contestation and the epistemological contradictions the ESD/EfS debate raises provide a distinct learning advantage. A key requirement of any course on sustainability/sustainable development is, in fact, to problematise the concepts of *sustainable development* and *sustainability* and to consider the contested ways in which they are framed and the reasons for this. In this way, the sustainability/sustainable development discourse itself provides a powerful way of understanding the role asymmetric power relations play in determining which constructions become legitimated, and the fundamental relevance of the dis-

course to learners' own lives encourages their engagement in the debate. It calls for a critical theorization that shapes the content of courses, different from courses that alert learners to *issues* and *solutions* without a grounding in the genealogy and politics of those *symptoms* of the ecological and social problematic.

The transformational role of education for sustainable development

The earlier focus on education *for* the environment took into account the ontological and epistemological challenges implicit in the theorization, development and delivery of EE as an agent of change. As noted, education for sustainable development may challenge the dominant social paradigm even more trenchantly, calling for social transformation as well as the transformation of education itself and requiring pedagogical approaches most likely to empower learners. Like education *for* the environment, EDS calls for a critical perspective, an overtly political stance that may encourage learners to understand and critique the way the world works. Since the earlier EE movement, educational systems have become increasingly managerial and commercial in their goals and approaches (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). The transformative goals of education for sustainable development may be dismissed by some as mere *utopianism*, but Huckle, (2012) perceives the goal of the educator as striving for *concrete utopianism* (p. 43), bringing, as noted above, greater *realism* to education, teaching and learning about the realities of how the world works.

Such a transformational role represents a serious challenge to the overall educational systems of countries. The exposure of ideology that education for sustainability may provide constitutes what Maher (1985) has termed *dangerous knowledge* that makes it difficult to fit comfortably in the formal curriculum. As Apple notes (1979), the formal education curriculum plays a key role in sustaining and reinforcing social hegemony, leading to the acceptance and reproduction of the ideology of the dominant social paradigm. It does this through the overt and the hidden curricula, perpetuating utilitarian attitudes toward nature while maintaining the class and societal division that serves the values and ideology of dominant social groups (and see, for example, Trainer, 1990; Fien, 1993; O'Connor, 1998). Trainer (1990) describes the curricula of schools and colleges, in their overt and hidden manifestations, as reproducing the socially and ecologically unsustainable values and practices of the industrial affluent society – promoting the desirability of economic growth and a competitive economy, the importance of individualism and competitive advantage, and market determination of economic and social priorities. O'Connor (1998) similarly notes that the education system *per-*

forms most activities that are necessary for the pro-duction of labour power (p. 149). Consequently, the emancipatory and change-agent roles of education for sustainable development are problematic for the *reproductive* function that education has assumed, alerting learners to the potentially hegemonic role of education and developing the skills to interrogate ex-isting knowledge (Sultana, 1989).

Impediments to a critical agenda

This chapter argues, then, that education for sustain-able development, to be effective and to assume the transformational role ascribed to it, requires a critical theorization and a critical pedagogy that empower learners to envision *a moral economy of social jus-tice, citizenship and sustainability, based in social democracy* (Huckle, 1996, p. 15; Huckle, 2012). However, there are problems associated with the critical theorization advocated here, a major one be-ing the question of how educators are to gain prepa-ration for teaching critical perspectives if that per-spective is generally lacking from their own profes-sional development. There is also the question of po-litical difficulties and possible career consequences for educators who promote a critical agenda for edu-cation for sustainable development (Springett and Kearins, 2001). Academics are constrained to seek publication in top tier journals in order to strengthen academic assessments and to compete for promotion and research funding, and forays outside traditional disciplinary boundaries represent risk. The ideologi-cal struggle between the curriculum promoted in in-creasingly commercial and managerial educational institutions, at whatever level, and the sustainable development agenda may be fearsome. For example, a critical agenda promotes a radical perspective on the need for fundamental systemic change to modes of production and consumption. What we have fre-quently seen, however, is a focus on the *management* of the agenda of sustainable development (Luke, 1999; Springett, 2006a; 2006b).

The fact that a critical pedagogy is openly ideologi-cal is, then, a major obstacle. That is not to say that the intention is to co-opt learners to a particular per-spective, although detractors might claim this. The goals of a critical pedagogy are emancipatory, in-tended to foster a habit of critical inquiry that *pre-vents* such capture. The goal is to involve learners in thinking through both personal and broader societal issues and to *hold a mirror to the world and show it as it is and as it has produced and shaped its own nature* (O'Connor, 1998, p. 52) – again, what Huckle (2012) refers to as *realism* in education. This re-quires that we listen to voices that are seldom em-powered and hear perspectives on sustainability and sustainable development that do not solely reflect the views of *management* at whatever level (Springett, 2006a; 2006b). Such education is openly *political* in intent: it does not claim the supposed *neutrality* of

the orthodox curriculum that helps to reinforce soci-etal hegemony in covert and purportedly neutral and unbiased ways (Apple, 1979; Fien, 1993; Huckle, 1996; O'Connor, 1998; Springett, 2010), nor perpet-uate a *sanitised* picture of the world (Willmott, 1994).

It is, however, a tough challenge in today's educa-tional environment, where institutional impediments to education for sustainable development are rife. Beder et al. (2009) maintain that many of the diffi-culties that have been encountered in transforming education arise from changes in its provision and de-livery at all levels and from the increasing influence that neo-liberal politics and the corporate world have on the nature of education. These changes start at schools level. It is not difficult to find *environmental* components of the curriculum in schools – nature study and outdoor education have long featured on the curriculum, and the 1990s saw the rising popu-larity of *whole-school* approaches through such pro-grammes as *eco-schools*, although Huckle (2013) warns us of the issues raised by the not-infrequent corporate sponsorship of such programmes. Beder et al. (ibid.) also reveal the ways and means by which corporates have attempted to capture childhood, cre-ating *hyper-consumers* of their products and services and, in the longer term, submissive employees and passive citizens, more engaged with *what they have* than *who they are*. The formal education system it-self has played a part in the transformation of *what education is for* since government funding, or the lack of it, renders schools vulnerable to the pressure of business selling its products to children via schools through sponsorships, competitions, com-munication technologies and classroom materials that help to grow brand loyalty. More broadly, the focus on *consumer choice* has seen increases in the privatisation of education and the provision of char-ter schools – often with corporate funding and in-volvement.

Teachers often feel besieged by the demands of time-consuming new testing regimes, lack of control over what is taught, additional *welfare* responsibilities for their students and uncertainty about their own fu-tures where tenure is threatened and unionisation is discouraged. It takes little imagination to grasp that education for sustainable development is likely to struggle under these conditions. Corporate-spon-sored classroom materials provide a distorted view of environmental, health and social issues (Beder et al., 2012; Huckle, 2013). Schools have been driven to shift the goals of education from *quality* to *effi-ciency*, imperilling the goals of education for sustain-able development. As Beder et al. underline, busi-ness coalitions are powerful, capable of influencing government policy to transform schools into compet-ing business enterprises and of engineering a nar-rowing of the curriculum to focus on numeracy and literacy, computer skills and a business-friendly view of history and society.

Concern about ideological premises that increasingly dominate the tertiary system of education has also been vociferously expressed. The tertiary education sector, as *conscience and critic* of society, might have been expected to take the leadership role in the discourse about sustainability and sustainable development and to embrace it as a moral responsibility: it is here that our teachers and leaders are prepared for their future roles. However, the increasingly reductionist turn the agenda of Higher Education has taken in recent years is characterized by competition and market-driven values that mimic the corporate ethos rather than a collaborative culture (Collini, 2003; Parks, 2013), resulting in the commercialization and commodification of Higher Education. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), reviewing changes in American universities, identified this as *academic capitalism*; while Anderson (2014, p. 39) notes that, in the UK, *universities risk reduction to so many sales outlets for customers in need of livery for the market*. The UK report of The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2008), and the *Browne Report* on Higher Education and Student Finance (2010), underlined the increasing bureaucratic control of higher education seen as a *market* in which consumer demand (not least the requirements of business) will be sovereign (Collini, 2010; McKibbin, 2010). These are not trends that are likely to encourage either a critical perspective or a focus on sustainability. Schools and Higher Education institutions are in danger of becoming *edu-businesses*.

While the limitations of this paper do not provide the scope to discuss in detail the means to translate theory into praxis, the critiques considered here do bear important implications for the role of the teacher. What kind of role are we to assume if we are to reflect the goals of a critical theorization, and what kind of pedagogical choices are to be made? There is strong consensus amongst educators that a holistic, interdisciplinary approach is to be preferred. It is also advocated that pedagogical choices, that engage teachers and learners in action methods, are effective approaches that help to shape their role(s) – not by narrow definition, but through providing for experiential learning and helping to create democratic learning contexts (Springett, 2010). Action methods may be regarded as a paradigm rather than a set of methods (Norton, 2008) – they give students a higher degree of control over their own learning and provide a basis for responsible decision-making. In terms of the role of the teacher, it is suggested that the teacher who combines action methods with an approach based in critical theory is akin to Gramsci's classification of the *organic* intellectual. The goal is to enable people to see the world in a new way

through active participation in practical life (Gramsci, 1971)[4]. As Huckle has remarked (1996), such a process becomes a critical inquiry in its own right. It enables us to explore the complexities and implications of sustainability, taking account of the economic, political, cultural, technical, social and environmental forces that foster or impede its goals.

Conclusion and key questions for ESD

In the thirty years since the concept of sustainable development stepped centre stage in the environment and development discourses, the debate around the concept and the struggle to control it have been advanced by powerful forces, often in order to tame its potentially radical agenda and its central questions of values, justice, equity and a responsible relationship with nature. However, the genesis of the construct is contested: it is seen by some as arising from the capitalist means of production and consumption that is at the base of *un*sustainability and supporting the hegemony of that paradigm. This contestation suggests the need for a more dialectical approach to the discourse, not a two-dimensional, un-dialectic *map*, but something more discursive. Education for sustainable development has the potential to play an important role here. If freed from the ideology that supports the *status quo*, ESD might prove to have the power to develop such a discursive approach that eschews neo-classical economics, calling for a better understanding and treatment of nature, and a norm of social equity and eco-justice. Such an overall conception of *the good life* might address key questions that have been raised by writers from different milieus and disciplines, in particular, the eternal philosophical question of *How to live?*

We would ask ourselves, What is education *for*? Curricula would need to address the reality and causes of *un*sustainability and encourage reflection on fundamental questions about the capitalist economy of consumerism. Questions about our ways of being would be posed: *How Much is Enough?* (Durning, 1992; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012), and *To Have or To Be?* (Fromm, 1976). Learners would be encouraged to discuss what a *sustainable* political economy would look like, meeting the needs of all of the world's people while conserving the means and conditions of production. They would be educated to aspire to a transformational role as agents of change and to envision the moral economy of social justice, citizenship and sustainability, based in social democracy, the agenda that Huckle (1996) sees as being at the heart of ESD. As he remarks, such a process becomes a critical inquiry in its own right. It enables us to explore the complexities and implications of sustainability, taking account of the

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[4] In Gramsci's classification of intellectuals into *traditional* and *organic*, the former are seen as *functionaries* with close allegiance to their own tradition and craft, practising under what they believe to be a rhetoric of auton-

omy. *Organic* intellectuals, on the other hand, enable people, through the provision of an alternative ideological framework, to possibly resolve dual consciousness by seeing the world in a new way.

economic, political, cultural, technical, social and environmental forces that foster or impede its goals. Might we not envision a *republic* of sustainable development educators and learners, free from some of the current constraints on ESD and able to broaden the conversation to include much wider and more diverse audiences? Such a movement might, perhaps, be akin to that of the popular, vernacular movements of the 1950s and 1960s that fed into the formalisation of environmental education. No doubt we would find that different ontological, epistemological and pedagogical perspectives would be rife, along with matters of quality control of content and delivery, of measurement, assessment and evaluation – of '*control*' *per se*. However, the scope for a more interactive and critical curriculum, drawing on some of the themes cited in this chapter and available to a wider community, is considerable. Will it emerge to drive the much-needed revolution in education for sustainable development?

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