Danish University Colleges

ECO Schools

trends and divergences: a Comparative Study on ECO-school development processes in 13 countries

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The significance of education in creating a sustainable future is now being internationally recognised, particularly through initiatives inspired by the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. At the same time, increased interest is being shown by governments, teachers and local school communities in progressing towards sustainable school visions and goals. Thus, this user-friendly little book will make an excellent contribution to each of these levels of interest through the provision of guidelines which sketch out, explain and summarise the domain. As well as school-based uses it will be an essential reference for people in ESD policy positions and should be an excellent, compact information source for student teachers. The book is the work of the School Development through Environmental Education (SEED) and Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) networks and is the result of a two-stage, multi-stakeholder international research project involving 13 countries, including Australia.

My first reaction to the book was to balk at its title, for two reasons. The first was a suspicion that the terms ‘quality’ and ‘criteria’ would be used narrowly as bases for assessment and accountability – as they have been in a wide variety of Australian education contexts in recent years. But this fear was quickly dispelled when the authors stated on p.9 that “quality criteria … cannot be considered as a tool for quality control”. The authors specifically declare that quality criteria should not be confused with performance indicators because “quality control should give orientation and inspiration” (p. 9).

The second concern I had with the title was a little more difficult to dispel: the uncritical use of the term ‘ESD’. For example, on p.4 the authors propose the use of ‘ESD-Schools’ to replace the more commonly used ‘eco-schools’ or ‘green schools’. Their stated aim is to broaden the environmental issues focus to include aspects of sustainable development such as participation, equality, self-efficacy and social justice. Whilst this direction is definitely welcomed, there is still the problem of the widely documented contention surrounding the term ‘sustainable development’ and in my opinion, a brief upfront explanation of the issues around the term could have been included. Broad brush strokes by those who have moved on from the issue do not help people in schools grappling with the inevitable criticism from local community activists who now struggle against environmental degradation being executed under the banner of sustainable development. Similarly, the title of the book and the introduction brushes over the debate in environmental education concerning the use of the term “ESD”. Fortunately, these criticisms refer only to the title and not the content of the book.

The authors have identified three criteria, each subdivided into what they refer to as smaller areas. These are: criteria regarding the quality of teaching and learning processes (nine smaller areas); criteria regarding school policy (four smaller areas) and criteria regarding the school’s external relations (two smaller areas). Each smaller area presents a clearly written example and an explanatory rationale, followed by a short list of between two and five sub criteria. This format takes up most of the book, providing a succinct and positive picture of the breadth and possibilities for learning and futures in school transformation scenarios.

As well as the parameters of ESD that are broadened and clarified by the guidelines, the strength of the book is undoubtedly its examples and its rationales. Readers
who uphold the primacy of teaching and learning in education will be pleased with the emphasis in that about half of the book is devoted to this criterion. Apparently there was much teacher input in the writing phases of the book because there are many inspiring school-based examples of engaging productively with controversy, of real learning for change, and importantly, learning for enhancement of the children’s potential as humans. Below are two examples.

On p.18 pertaining to “… in the area of perspectives for the future”, the example describes a teacher who enabled her year five children to envisage and then create cardboard cut-outs of their imaginary grand-children, which they then fixed above a timeline into the future. This helped the children to foresee a future that took account of, rather than conflicted with, their own interests. Part of the rationale for this is:

Without an understanding of different possible futures, there is no space left for democracy. Democracy builds on the idea that we together shape the future we want. All decisions and changes have implications for the future in the short term and the long term. To try to foresee these and to make up our mind about what are the most desirable implications help students to be actively involved in shaping the future of society and the conditions for their daily life. (p. 19)

The smaller area “…critical thinking and the language of possibility” is exemplified on p.24 with a description of a local community project implemented by seventh grade children and their teacher who investigated the complexity around conflicting interests in the issue of pesticide use. The rationale for this includes the following:

A critical thinker is ... a human being who strives to couple the critical process of reflection and inquiry with an empathetic and optimistic vision of potential, searching for solutions and positive direction. The language of possibility underlines that the critical thinker does not look for limits and restrictions but in a creative and open-minded way searches for and is inspired by ways that have been successful and fruitful for others – in other cultures, in other periods of time and other situations. (p. 25)

The book is characterised by its emphasis on reflection and innovation, solution-oriented thinking and in general the language of hope, possibility and alternative actions. Overall, the book is highly recommended for its succinct overview and clear, helpful explanations for teachers and school communities engaging in the broad EE/ESD field. It can be downloaded from http://seed.schule.at.

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