



# **Ethics Teaching in Education for Sustainable Development**

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# Introduction

- Education for sustainable development (ESD) is nowadays internationally regarded as an important aspect of the overall education of children and young people in the world (e.g. UNESCO 2019).
- It is included among the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2019; see in particular target 4.7).
- Besides its *content* – sustainable development – ESD is also characterized by its emphasis on a democratic and participatory educational *procedure*:
  - ”Designing teaching and learning in an interactive, learner-centred way that enables exploratory, action oriented and transformative learning” (UNESCO 2019).



# Introduction

- The central components that constitute the idea of sustainable development may all be given different interpretations, such that different sustainability goals are generated.
- Hence, it is a controversial question precisely what is to count as sustainable development (e.g. Lélé 1991; Beckerman 1994; Dobson 1998, Ch. 2; Jacobs 1999; O'Neill 2001).
- This means that ESD cannot be neutral. Instead it is bound to rest on implicit or explicit ethical assumptions.
- It is therefore an important component within a comprehensive ESD to reveal and discuss such assumptions.



# Introduction

- Even though ethical issues are at the very core of ESD, there is a considerable risk that the ethical dimension is not treated in such education, or that it is treated very sparsely.
- One reason for this is simply tradition:
  - Sustainability research and discussion has so far largely taken place within the framework of the natural and social sciences.
- Another related reason is that teachers involved in ESD are typically not well-versed in ethical theory.
- The Challenge:
  - The challenge, then, is to find an approach to ethics teaching in ESD that is (1) suitable with respect to both its *content* and its educational *procedure*, and (2) available also to teachers who are not experienced within the field of ethics.



# Purpose

- The main purpose of our paper is to show how the two aspects of ESD mentioned above – its content and procedure – reveal the importance of bringing ethical considerations into ESD, as well as provide challenges for ethics teaching in ESD.
  - But we will also briefly mention a tentative suggestion for a promising way of dealing with these challenges.



# Content

- We proceed from the characterization of *sustainable development* provided in the so called "Brundtland report"  
(*Our Common Future*, 1987)
  - This is far from the only one, but...
    1. ... reasonably, similar components appear in other characterizations.
    2. The point here is that the idea of sustainability is imprecise; the fact that there are *more* characterizations cannot mean that it is less imprecise; rather the opposite.



# Content

- The Brundtland Report:

”Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

  - How are we supposed to understand *development* in this context?
  - What is a *need*?
  - What does it take to *compromise*...?
  - What is required in order to have an *ability*...?
  - How should we understand our ethical reasons with respect to *future generations*?
  - Should anything else than human beings be included (in *the present and future generations*)?



# The need for ethical reflection

- All these questions are more or less controversial.
  - Different answers give different sustainability goals (weaker/stronger)
- Different ethical theories will give partly different answers to them.
- Also, there are additional ethical questions, e.g., about:
  - how to implement the goal of sustainability (what actions/policies are justifiable and who is responsible for what – e.g. individuals vs collectives?) (How should we make the right actions happen?);
  - how to weigh it against other goals that may conflict with it, and how to complement it (if needed);
  - how to transform it into more or less local action (by e.g. a particular country, a particular organization/company, a particular individual/group of individuals). What ought to be done locally?





# Procedure

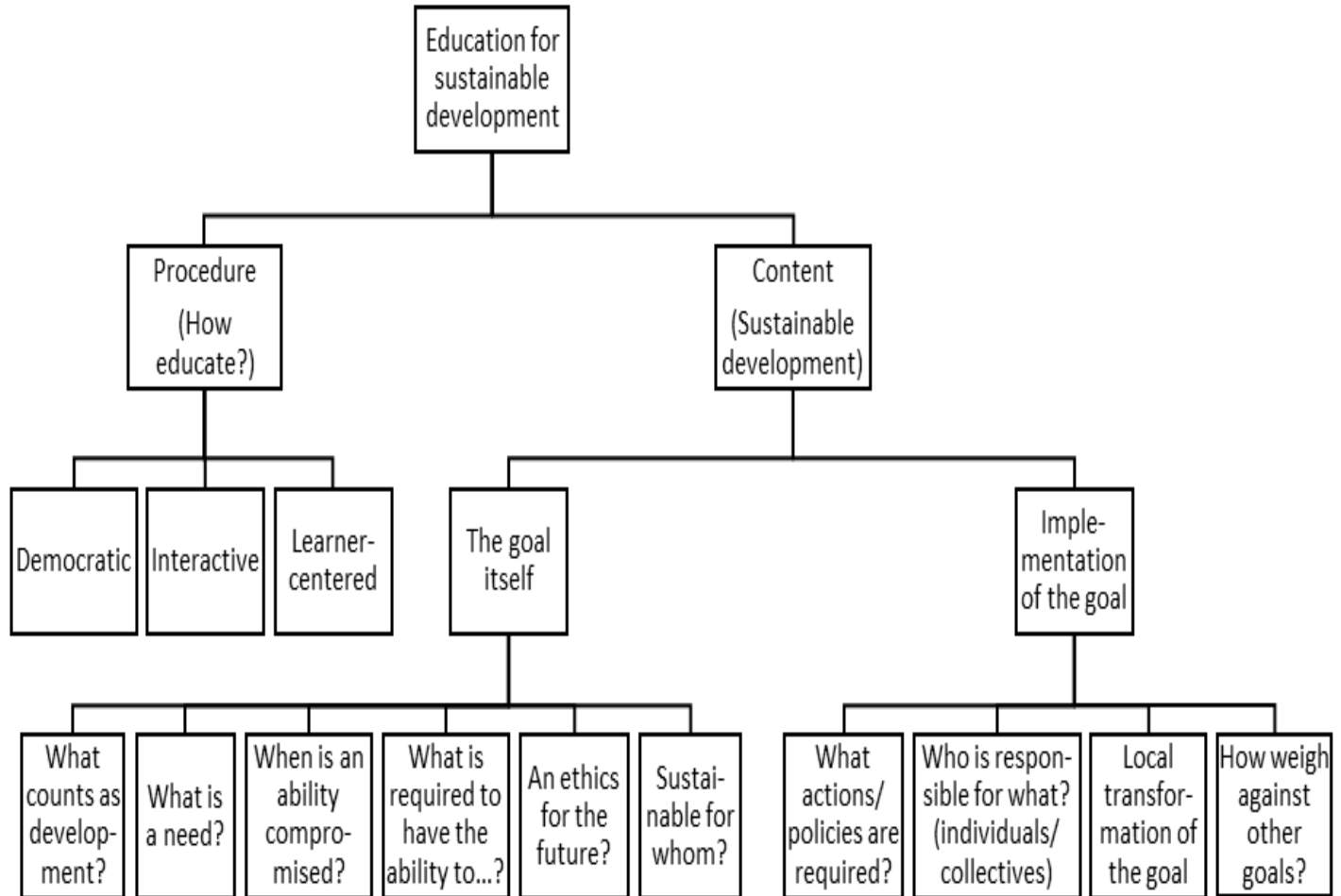
- There is widespread agreement among those who work practically or theoretically with ESD that such education should be conducted by way of a student-active, learner-centered, interactive form of educational procedure that promotes democratic participation.
- It even seems accurate to say that as the term ‘education for sustainable development’ has come to be used, the application of such a teaching procedure lies in its very meaning.
- This is apparent in UNESCO’s description of what ESD amounts to, where one of the items is pedagogy and learning environment:
  - “Designing teaching and learning in an interactive, learner-centred way that enables exploratory, action oriented and transformative learning” (UNESCO 2019b; see also UNESCO 2017).



# The challenge

- The challenge, then, is to find an approach to ethics teaching in ESD that is (1) suitable with respect to both its *content* and its educational *procedure*, and (2) available also to teachers who are not experienced within the field of ethics.
- We are now in a position to illustrate the multifaceted ethical complexity of ESD, bringing in both the aspects pertaining to its content and those pertaining to its procedure:

# The challenge





# The challenge

- The upshot is that teachers of ESD should be aware of the multifaceted ethical complexity of sustainable development and of the fact that any specification of a general characterization of sustainable development (e.g. the Brundtland characterization) is bound to be controversial – and that teaching proceeding from any such specification is non-neutral.
- It is important both that teachers have this awareness and that they have the ability to critically reflect on the ethical dimension of sustainable development, so that they can pass this awareness over to their pupils in their mutual work with sustainability issues in school.
- Furthermore, to the extent that teachers want to abide by ESD, this should be done within a democratic and participatory teaching framework.



# The challenge

- Managing the ethical dimension of sustainable development in a teaching context is a major challenge for several reasons:
  - Just as it is a controversial question what should could as sustainable development, it is a controversial question which ethical point of view or perspective that should guide our pursuit of such development;
  - teachers involved in ESD are typically not very experienced within the field of ethics;
  - and schools are expected to work with sustainability issues through all stages, with target groups whose prerequisites differ widely.



# Final remark

- Not time to elaborate on the question of how to approach the ethical dimension of ESD in teaching, but in our full paper we provide a tentative suggestion:
- Adopt a methods-based approach to ethics teaching:
  - Instead of focusing on ethical theories, focus on methods for moral reasoning.
    - We have developed the methods-based approach elsewhere, for instance in an Atiner-paper: “Teaching Ethics to Non-Philosophy Students – A Methods-Based Approach” (<https://www.atiner.gr/papers/EDU2017-2338.pdf> )
  - Advantages:
    - It does not take any particular ethical theory or perspective as a point of departure (it is neutral between ethical theories).



# Final remark

- This also means that no ethical perspective is excluded in advance.
  - Thus it fits neatly within the democratic, participatory framework of ESD.
  - Hence, it answers the first part of the challenge we posed above, that the approach to ethics education in ESD should be “(1) suitable with respect to both its content and its educational procedure”.
- Furthermore, the methods-based approach does not require the teacher to be well-versed in ethical theory.
  - The methods are fairly easy to learn and practice, and they do not require a philosophical background.
  - Hence, it answers the second part of the challenge we posed above, that the approach to ethics education in ESD should be “(2) available also to teachers who are not experienced within the field of ethics”.
- Lastly, the methods can be introduced successively, where different methods – or aspects of them – are suitable for different target groups – e.g. for pupils of different ages.



**Thank you  
for the  
attention!**