

CHILDREN, YOUTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

This entry delineates the fit between current, dominant theories of youth and unsustainable development. It makes the case that ecological and social sustainability are inextricably linked. Using education as a vehicle for analysis, the authors delineate how educational institutions prepare youth to compete in a capitalist system built on domination rather than sustainability. A counter-discourse of youth development and education is offered.

1. Linking Sustainability and Social Justice

Much literature concerned with sustainability focuses on the problems of ecological sustainability at the expense of examining the connection with actual social experience. Yet whatever changes are needed to put humans on a more ecologically sustainable course will need to occur in social contexts rife with their own imbalances and instabilities. Those who lean toward ecological concerns at the expense of social concerns miss an important point; societal change toward ecological balance will depend on coordinating efforts in particular places between unequal social groups and by working toward social equity and justice. Similarly, most literature dealing with social problems totally ignores the natural environment. Whatever changes are needed to lead humans into more harmonious relationships with each other will occur in particular ecological contexts.

This chapter makes the case that ecological and social sustainability are inextricably linked.

The fact that so many of those working for either ecological or social change slight or miss altogether the obvious connection between the two reflects the fragmentation of disciplinary knowledge fostered by modern institutions of education. But recognizing this disconnection and fragmentation is also reason for hopefulness. It may be that only by joining the formidable forces (hearts, minds, hands and souls) of social change with the equally formidable forces of ecological change that either project will be successful. Sustainability is explored in this chapter through a lens that includes both the discourse of ecological as well as social sustainability. Both are approached through a linkage to social equity and social justice concerns. First the dominant paradigms that have created and jeopardized a sustainable future for youths will be explored and critiqued; included in this is a discussion of the contribution of educational institutions in shaping youths unquestioningly to take their places within an unsustainable future. Then a counter discourse will be offered that reconceptualizes the "truths" offered by the dominant discourse and reframes issues of sustainability. Part of this offering will include the role that the institutions of formal education can play in creating an ecologically and socially sustainable future.

Before launching into a review of the relative sustainability of current social and educational practices and their impact on children and youth, our use of the terms sustainability and development need to be clarified. Like much of the language in Agenda 21, sustainability has contested meanings. In this discussion, sustainability refers to both ecological and social sustainability and implies political action to move toward sustainability. Following in the tradition of Leopold, ecological sustainability deals with our relationship to the natural environment or land we share and that sustains all life. Social sustainability deals with our relationship to each other in particular places (environments) at particular times. These two realms are obviously inseparable in actual experience; unfortunately, our language and history create a dichotomy that abstracts human beings out of natural environments and deals with environmental problems in isolation from the social experience of political economy. Although there are elements of social and political relationships that do not directly impact the land, ultimately, these relationships all exist within a context of places that will be shaped by and in turn shape the nature of these relationships.

The concept of sustainable development helps bring the ecological together with the social. Development is the conscious process of change a particular human community undertakes in a particular ecological place. This process is directed by political economies that are more or less socially and ecologically sustainable. A question one might put to development is: How will this change impact human and natural communities, both proximate and distant, now and in the future? This needs to be coupled with a challenge; "...we must ask ourselves a collective question: What kind of world order are we creating, and for whose benefit?"

The assumptions we bring to this question about the meaning and value of sustainability will determine the course of social and ecological development. This paper is concerned with how these assumptions about social and ecological meaning and value are passed on to children and youth through their education and social experience.

2. The Educational Experience of Youth

Revisiting Agenda 21 reveals a broad spectrum of challenges and tensions surrounding the concept of sustainability. When children and youth become part of this conversation, it is most often in the context of the need for more sustainability education, both formal and non-formal. The question must then be asked, how much are children and youth actually learning about sustainability?

One way to answer this question is to examine the discourse of formal educational institutions. Though clearly education occurs everywhere and is much more than schooling, the discourse of schooling expresses and reflects much of what a society believes is important for children and youth to experience and know. The next section will begin with a discussion of what might be called the dominant educational paradigm in the U.S. and will be followed by an ecological critique of this paradigm. Each will be examined for its approach toward concerns of sustainability.

2.1. The Dominant Educational Paradigm in the United States

Currently in the United States, the public discourse and resulting educational policies have very little to do with the dilemmas of social and ecological sustainability. The absence of ecological and social issues from the public educational agenda is almost complete. When it appears at all it is on the fringe, either as an add-on to an already crowded disciplinary field (e.g., a course or unit in ecology, or environment) or as a novel way to approach interdisciplinary learning (e.g., a thematic unit on rivers, deserts, or poverty). Equally absent from talk about education and from standard curriculum is a recognition of the connection between ecological issues and social issues. On the educational scene—and this is true of both progressive and traditional camps—ignorance of ecological principles and their inseparability from social realities remains widespread and deep. In its place is an equally deep and widespread commitment to preparing youth for successful participation in economic life.

Today the connection between education and economics is most often expressed as the need and the commitment to prepare students for employment in the fiercely competitive, high-tech world of the Twenty-First Century. Historian Joel Spring puts it plainly: "In the 1980s and 1990s businesses and their legion of economists and accountants completed their takeover of educational rhetoric. Now the common call is to educate students 'to meet the needs of the global economy'". As Agenda 21 suggests the needs of the global economy are in conflict with the needs of sustainability.

It is common sense theory that education should to a degree be linked to future employment. Underneath all the window dressing about standards and knowledge, this is one of the main messages educational institutions (schools, family, media) deliver. It is fair to say that most youth (future workers) and their families (current workers) want to earn enough money in order to live in security and comfort. Successful schooling is advertised and bought by many as a prerequisite to making money within the current economic structure.

For their part employers insist that they need employees with the job skills that will keep their businesses competitive on the global stage. Government, its economists, and the

media reinforce this message and direct it at educational institutions, sometimes with militant urgency. The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* bemoans the loss of "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce.... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war". There are constant reminders that the highest wages will be paid to those workers who as students accumulate the most marketable skills or credentials. The fact that these high wage jobs are relatively scarce and that no one wants himself or his children to enter the job market unprepared and without skills helps explain the dominance of the message to link education to work.

But there may be something deeper at work here than employers' calls for competitiveness and employees' desire for security that link economic and educational ends. Cultural critic, Neil Postman, seeks to identify the underlying narratives behind what we call education in our culture. Such narratives, or as Postman would say "gods", provide a foundation for how we think about our lives.

Each one is a story; not any kind of story, but one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose. A god, in the sense I am using the word, is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one's life around it.

Such narratives or gods, one might also say myths, are necessary to a culture because they "give meaning to the world" Postman exposes and rejects the current gods that dominate our culture and constrict our educational vision of how to make a life. The chief culprits are eminent in the pantheon of the global economy: the god of economic utility, the god of consumerism, and the god of technology.

These narratives tell us that the purpose of education in our culture is to prepare children to compete in the economic life of the community where their primary function will be that of consumer of the goods and services produced by an ever-improving and awe-inspiring technology. Postman shows how our government, media and schools constantly promote these narratives, how their teachings are reinforced and echoed everywhere so that learning to make a living (instead of a life), buy, and own are our dominant cultural lessons. Such an education "so diminishes the world that it mocks one's humanity".

In his analysis of two UNESCO-sponsored reports on education, Spring emphasizes the role that the narrative of the global economy has played in diminishing our educational vision and mocking our humanity. The first report by the International Commission on the Development of Education is *Learning to Be, the World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (1972).

Spring illustrates how the concepts of lifelong learning, and the learning society--now used almost exclusively to describe the need for workers and businesses to adapt to technological and scientific change in order to remain competitive--can take on very different meanings. Specifically, Spring shows how in *Learning to Be*, these concepts were linked to political power and humanistic development. The four assumptions underlying this more than quarter-century-old report are that 1) political organizations must promote

the idea of human rights, 2) educational systems must teach and support democracy, 3) the concept of human development goes far beyond preparation for employment to encompass diverse commitments to self, family and community, and 4) lifelong learning, as education of the whole person, is presented as "the cure for individual and social problems". *Learning to Be* clearly suggests that the aim of education is part political action and part human and social development, an education "which focuses on the use of technological and scientific advances to enhance the welfare of humans and democracy".

Spring contrasts the language of this report with a contemporary document by the Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Unlike the earlier report, here "there is no mention of developing the new democratic person".

Spring shows how the "information society" envisioned by the prophet-leaders of the global economy is the driving force of the new educational vision. Where the 1972 report supported maximizing educational opportunity for the sake of democratic and humanistic learning, "the present Commission is primarily concerned with employment issues for secondary and postsecondary education.... the Commission's actual proposals boil down to a concern with utilizing human resources".

Spring's analysis of the global economy's role in shaping and sometimes dominating current educational discourse is significant to the discussion of sustainability for two key reasons. First, the global economy of free-market, growth economics is named as a cause for the current limited view of the purpose of education which may be leading us toward political problems. Spring worries, "If there are economic problems in the global economy, people should be prepared to solve them.

There is nothing in present proposals for education for the global economy that would provide the general population with the knowledge and skills to exercise political power" Here, Spring echoes others who are concerned that the economic purposes of education have subsumed other traditional aims such as democracy and humanistic development. Although the word is not used explicitly, implied in this critique of education is that it does not put societies on a pathway to social sustainability, that youth and children will be deprived of an educational opportunity to learn about human rights, social justice, equality, humanistic development and the kind of democratic politics needed to secure these. To this extent, Spring's critique speaks to some of the concerns of social sustainability raised in Agenda 21.

The second reason Spring's analysis is significant is that, although it is deeply concerned with the social effects of intense national commitment to global, growth economics, like other critiques of the dominant educational paradigm, it is completely silent about the relationship of these economics to the environment, to the places where people actually live. From the perspective of ecological sustainability, this silence is double jeopardy: not only does the dominant educational discourse totally ignore or simply commodify environment, so do the dominant critiques of the dominant discourse. The effect of this silence is to push concerns about the environment to the margins where it is called environmentalism, a fringe position banished from serious talk about serious sociopolitical problems. However, as Agenda 21 shows, social realities are intimately related to

ecological realities. Educating children and youth for a sustainable future will depend on making the connection between the social realm and ecological realm as a starting point for thinking about education.

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