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Title: Justice in the Sustainability Curriculum

Year: 2021

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Juego, B. (2021, May 2021). Justice in the Sustainability Curriculum. Great Transition Initiative. <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-juego>



May 2021

Justice in the Sustainability Curriculum

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

Bonn Juego

Stephen Sterling's [essay](#) "Educating for the Future We Want" provides a glimpse of his significant contributions to studies on global education and sustainability.¹ It historically charts the limited conception and passive reception of "sustainability education" (i.e., the integration of sustainability agenda into education policy, or the treatment of education as change agent for sustainability goal). The more extensive emphasis that Sterling discussed about the ideational and discursive aspects (i.e., "the epistemic sets of values and ideas") in explaining why sustainability education is narrowly conceived and widely unrecognized may overshadow his important acknowledgement of the *material* circumstances (i.e., "the socioeconomic, political, and technological pressures") through which historical progress and change originate. Good intentions for reforms and policies for transformation are not enough; progressive movements for the great transition must overcome the "very real constraints and influences that weigh heavily on mainstream educational thinking and practice." Indeed, philosophical ideas about global education are not, and should not be, independent of real material conditions of the contemporary world under capitalism.

Since the 1970s, UN-led mainstreaming of "Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD) has been slow but steady: from a low-key status in the UN Conference on the Environment (1972), the Earth Summit's Agenda 21 (1992), and Education for All (2000), to an increasing popularity with the UN Decade of ESD (2005–2014), Global Action Programme on ESD (2015–2019), and Futures of Education (2019–2023). During this era, characterized by the evolving—and enduring—ideological dominance of neoliberal capitalist development paradigm, leading ESD proponents, specifically UNESCO, aligned with institutions of global economic governance

through a constant conceptual revision of education policy attuned to changes in the global economy.

Even though ideology does not directly cause social change, a crucial strategy to combat oppressive structures in the existing reality is to comprehend how desirable ideas about sustainability education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are instrumentalized to deepen marketization in the present world economy. The logic of global competitiveness defines and permeates current development agendas—from the coronavirus pandemic response to the solutions offered to address problems of climate change, poverty, learning crisis, health disparities, gender inequality, and social insecurity. For the last forty years, international organizations—notably, the OECD, World Bank, and multilateral development banks, as well as the ILO and UNDP—have been increasingly converging and acting in concert in writing the rules for the completion of the world market, thereby spreading capitalist social relations at a truly global scale.² Couched in the theme of “human capital development” through public-private partnership, education policies are being designed to program behavior and mindset of schools and students, including the poor and other marginalized identities, to accept the general principle of universal competition and to prepare themselves for systematic entanglement as a fully exploitable proletariat in the world economy.

Within the schema of proletarianization, the purpose of education for both developed and developing countries is to create neoliberal citizens who are not only entrepreneurial but also flexible workers with high levels of skills—thus productive, innovative, healthy, resilient, mobile, and available for exploitation by capital. The economic ideas, which use education as a tool to maximize the number of laborers and their productivity as much as possible, have not been formulated in a vacuum. Rather, the functionalist economism underpinning human capital projects of international organizations and national governments is shaped by, and is a response to, the material compulsions for human survival and social reproduction in today’s conjuncture. In particular, the expanding division of labor and global production chains that are propelled by the intensifying technological revolutions in the twenty-first century drive the mentality not only of capitalists but also of states, workers, schools, and students to embrace market-oriented education policies to survive and thrive on capitalism’s unfolding competitive world market.

While the globalization of the capitalist mode of production is a law of history according to classical Marxist social science, the universalization of the capitalist ethos is not a law of nature. Only reactionary educational and cultural forces of neoliberalism would peddle the propaganda that radical forms of worker-owned enterprises, democracy-driven socioeconomic institutions, and collective management of common resources are unthinkable and inviable. In essence, policy formulation of global sustainability education is an arena of contestation for political, social, and economic decision-making. Non-Western critical approaches to pedagogy and many alternative education networks have endured and shall continue to resist and conflict with dominant power structures.

The apparent prominence of the SDGs and the ubiquity of information technology have their own contradictions which open up spaces for engagement and windows of opportunity to advance pedagogical principles and education systems for what can be called a vision for “just sustainability” over the immediate and long terms. The reach of the Internet and social media nowadays makes it conducive to apply a Freirean approach to “popular education,” particularly the strategy of consciousness-raising wherein learners understand their own oppression, draw lessons from the lived experiences of others, collectively act upon the aspiration to take control of their lives, and discover the liberating possibilities of their will.

First, a holistic concept of just sustainability can be popularized in which the sustainable development discourse is embedded in the perspective of justice. This should come at a potentially pivotal moment of growing awareness about historical justice, racial justice, social justice, and climate justice. Just sustainability is a critique of tendencies to reduce sustainability to mere environmentalism, which is often based on the continuity of North-South colonialism alongside the vices of historical revisionism, Eurocentrism, methodological nationalism, and individualism. It is concerned with resolving inequalities, as central to socio-ecological crises, and it demands that healing the natural life support system requires atonement and reparation for the sins of exploitative extractivism in world-economic history. As such, just sustainability also has a mechanism of redistributive justice. It values a qualitative sense of justice, which should be the operating framework that informs numerical quantification of climate finance, energy use, emissions targets, or standard of living.

Secondly, the recent trend among schools and universities affirming the rhetoric of well-being, responsibility, and sustainability in their operations generates an opening to engage them into a sincere commitment to nurture wisdom as a core mission of education—i.e., the creation and dissemination of knowledge with conscientious and ethical considerations for the common good. Hence, there is also a momentum for the awakening of the alienated, precarious, and dispensable schoolteachers and university workers to mobilize against and overhaul the prevailing system of competitiveness, faux meritocracy, and cult of efficiency in academic work valuation and resource allocation. At the same time, appreciating diversity in education and learning systems as an antidote to homogenization would entail delinking from the domineering norms on rankings and standardization.

Lastly, educating for just sustainability necessitates collective action to build the underlying material preconditions for human flourishing. Progressive social and economic policies like unconditional basic incomes would not only help eliminate the problem of unemployment, but also greatly enhance human resources for self-cultivation and creativity, as well as the liberation of sentient beings from the necessity of wage labor. To this end, tangible and actual endeavors of alternative social formations organized around the spirit of cooperation and mutual aid, such as solidarity economies, must also be amplified and multiplied.

Endnotes

1. See also Stephen Sterling, "Separate Tracks, or Real Synergy?: Achieving a Closer Relationship between Education and SD, Post 2015," *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* 8, no. 2 (September 2014): 89–112.

2. Paul Cammack, "The UNDP, the World Bank and Human Development through the World Market," *Development Policy Review* 35, no. 1 (2017): 3–21; Paul Cammack, "The OECD and the World Market: Antecedents of Deep Marketization," *Globalizations* 16, no. 6 (2019): 804–818.

About the Author



Bonn Juego teaches international development studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His current research focuses on crises of development and such socioeconomic phenomena as authoritarian neoliberalism, populism, and resurgent nationalisms. He serves on the board of the Finnish Society for Development Research, as an expert for the World Economic Survey of the Leibniz Institute for Economic Research, and on the editorial board of *Globalizations*. Previously he worked in the Philippine government, social movements, and global civil society, including the secretariat of the Asia-Europe People's Forum. He holds a PhD in development and international relations from Aalborg University.

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Cite as Bonn Juego, "Justice in the Sustainability Curriculum," contribution to GTI Forum "The Pedagogy of Transition" *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-juego>.

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