Contributing to a More Sustainable Future:

Quality Education, Life Skills and Education for Sustainable Development

Introduction

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) provides an opportunity to progress towards implementing universal quality education that fosters the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values that lead to a more sustainable future.

Quality education has its roots deep in the history of the United Nations and international declarations. The right to education is mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The importance of education is also mentioned in the World Declaration on Education for All, the Dakar Framework for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals. Education is crucial for the well-being of individuals, nations, and the world.

Quality Education

Quality education is an effective means to fight poverty, build democracies, and foster peaceful societies. Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralist world. There is no one definition, list of criteria, a definitive curriculum, or list of topics for a quality education. Quality education is a dynamic concept that changes and evolves with time and changes in the social, economic, and environmental contexts of place. Because quality education must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate, quality education will take many forms around the world.

"Quality has become a dynamic concept that has constantly to adapt to a world whose societies are undergoing profound social and economic transformation. Encouragement for future-oriented thinking and anticipation is gaining importance. Old notions of quality are no longer enough. Despite the different contexts there are many common elements in the pursuit of a quality education, which should equip all people, women and men, to be fully participating members of their own communities and also citizens of the world".[1]

UNESCO has identified ten key aspects that support quality education related to the individual learner and to systems of education.[2]

At the level of the learner, quality education: **Seeks out the learner.** Learners may be excluded from education for a variety of reasons: ethnicity or racial bias, gender bias, poverty, health, social status, geographic isolation, and other forms of marginalization. Quality education seeks to reduce barriers to children attending school and then to enroll them in school. Thus, the cycle of exclusion can be broken and the children can start on the path to a life where it is possible to fulfill all human rights.

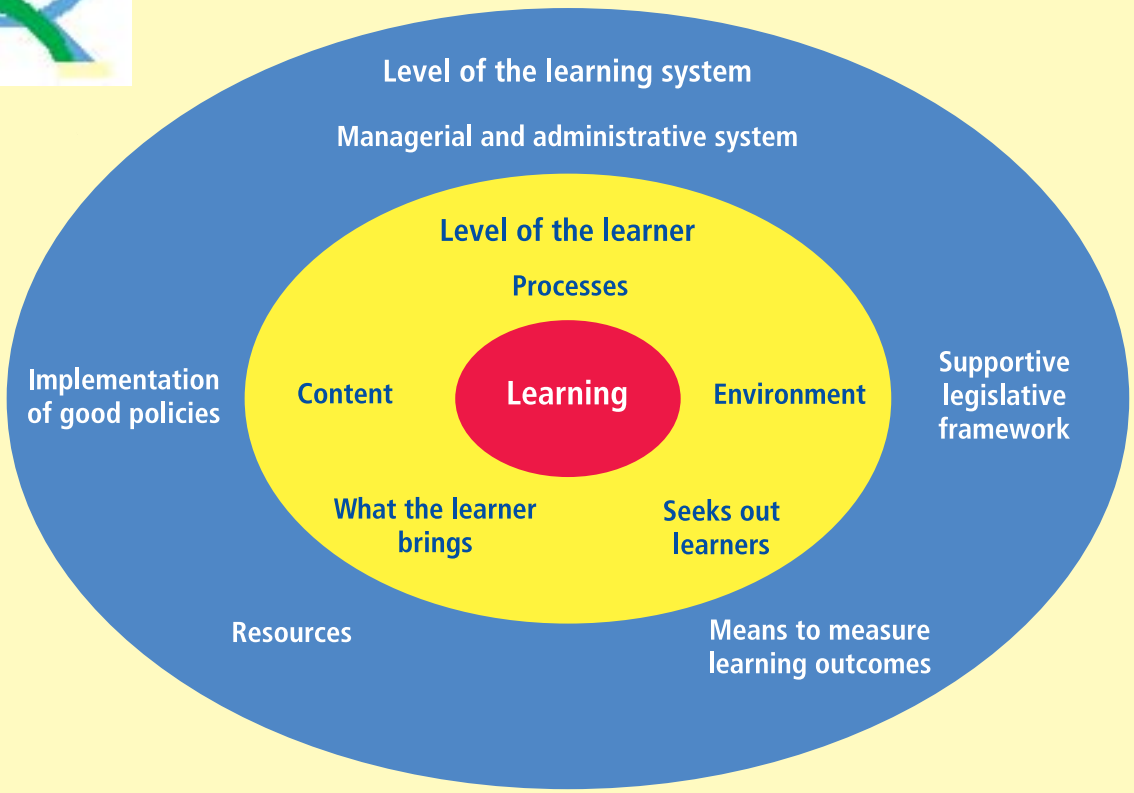
Acknowledges the learner's knowledge and experience. Learners bring with them a history of life experiences. All of these experiences, both positive and negative, affect how they learn. Some of their experiences can enhance their and others' learning. In a setting that creates quality education, learners are affirmed for their existing knowledge.

Makes Content Relevant. In the new millennium the process of curriculum revision must keep pace with the rapid changes brought about by globalization. Guiding questions for curriculum revision are: Is the curriculum still relevant today? Will it prepare our students to enter the workforce and community life? Will it give them the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values to sustain the learners over their lifetimes?

Uses many instructional and learning processes. A quality education carries with it the implication that the needs of individual learners will be considered and

1 Ministerial Round Table on Quality Education. 2003. Communiqué. Paris: UNESCO.
2 UNESCO. 2004. Quality Education and HIV/AIDS. Paris: UNESCO.

From Educating to Learning: A Framework for Quality Education



addressed in developing and delivering instruction. In quality education settings, the learners know that instruction can be adapted to meet their learning styles and needs.

Enhances the learning environment. Schools and other non-formal or informal learning facilities are reducing physical and psychological barriers to student participation. Physical modifications as simple as providing adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities for all students make it possible for girls to go to school. Psychological changes – such as eliminating bullying and corporal punishment – alleviate the fears of students and parents alike. Such change can increase enrollments quickly, and those enrolled can focus on learning rather than being distracted by threats to their well-being.

At the level of the system, quality education: **Creates a legislative framework.** Legislation at the national level is essential to ensure the human right of education to all individuals. Legislation paves the way for policy development, allocation of resources, curriculum reform, teacher education, and other elements of quality education).

Implements good policies. After legislation is passed, policy must be set from national ministry to local school levels. Each level can promote quality education or thwart it. Policy can cover a wide range of educational activities from upper administration to individual classrooms.

Builds administrative support and leadership. Administrational support for quality education throughout the educational system is essential: good teaching, welcoming enrollment policies, purchasing appropriate textbooks and supplies, as well providing professional development for all staff. The administration must have a system of checks and balances to ensure ongoing quality and efficient and equitable use of resources.

Requires sufficient resources. Reforming education to address quality will entail reassessing how resources are currently employed and require new resources – time, money, and the good will of personnel, all three of which may be in short supply. Implementing a new programme often means having to take resources away from existing programmes, yet current education must continue while new curriculum and pedagogy are being designed and developed. Governments must use the existing resources more effectively and provide new funding and resources during the start-up phase rather than expecting local administration and educators to donate in-kind services to accomplish this important task.

Measures learning outcomes. Traditionally, literacy, numeracy, and disciplinary knowledge are assessed using standardized tests and data are gathered related to enrollment and attendance; however, these do not measure many aspects of quality education. Missing are assessment and evaluation of life skills, perceptions, behaviors, and values, which are part of quality education. Data collection and monitoring of indicators should be designed with immediate, mid-term, and long-term outcomes in mind.

Education for Sustainable Development

"Education is an indispensable element for achieving sustainable development".[3]

All sustainable development programmes, including education for sustainable development (ESD), must consider the local environmental, economic, and societal conditions. ESD carries with it the inherent idea of implementing programmes that are locally relevant and culturally appropriate. As a result, ESD will take many forms around the world.

ESD increases civil capacity by enhancing and improving the workforce, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, participation in community-based decision making, and quality of life. To increase civil capacity in these five areas, formal, non-formal, and informal education must be combined.

Education for sustainable development is based on ideals and principals that underlie sustainability, such as intergenerational equity, gender equity, social tolerance, poverty alleviation, environmental preservation and restoration, natural resource conservation, and just and peaceable societies. The Rio Declaration contains 27 principles of sustainability that can help communities and school systems identify knowledge, principles, skills, and values on which they will create ESD or reorient existing education to address sustainability. For example,

- People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.
- The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.
- Eradicating poverty and reducing disparities in living standards in different parts of the world are essential to sustainable development.[4]

ESD has essential characteristics that can be implemented in many culturally appropriate forms. These essential characteristics include:

- ESD is based on the principles and values that underlie sustainable development.
- ESD deals with the well-being of all three realms of sustainability – environment, society, and economy.
- ESD promotes life-long learning.
- ESD is *locally relevant* and *culturally appropriate*.
- ESD is based on local needs, perceptions, and conditions, but acknowledges that fulfilling local needs often has international effects and consequences.

3 United Nations. 2004. General Assembly Resolution 58/219. New York: United Nations.
4 Keating, Michael, 1993. The Earth Summit's Agenda for Change - A Plain Language Version of Agenda 21 and the Other Rio Agreements. Geneva: Center for Our Common Future.

- ESD engages formal, non-formal, and informal education.
- ESD accommodates the evolving nature of the concept of sustainability.
- ESD addresses content, context, global issues, and local priorities.
- ESD builds civil capacity for community-based decision-making, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, adaptable workforce, and quality of life.
- ESD is interdisciplinary. No one discipline can claim ESD for its own, but all disciplines can contribute to ESD.
- ESD uses a variety of pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills.

These essential characteristics of ESD can be implemented in myriad ways, so that the resulting ESD programme reflects the unique environmental, social, and economic conditions of each locality.[5]

Four Thrusts of ESD

ESD was first described by Chapter 36 of *Agenda 21*. This chapter identified four major thrusts to begin the work of ESD:
(1) improve access to quality basic education,
(2) reorient existing education to address sustainable development,
(3) develop public understanding and awareness, and
(4) provide training programmes for all sectors of private and civil society. These four became major components for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.[6]

Improving access to quality basic education. Basic education is not only essential for improving the workforce and public participation in civil society, but also is central to a more sustainable future. A quality basic education addresses environmental stewardship along with knowledge of society and life skills. A quality education also includes local and global perspectives as the world becomes more interconnected through globalization.

The first priority for most countries is to provide six years of free and compulsory schooling; however, more and more countries are expanding compulsory education to nine or even 12 years. Unfortunately, in many countries, the current level of basic education is too low and the quality so lacking that it severely hinders national options and plans for a sustainable future.

Although education is one's hope of a more sustainable future, the most educated nations leave the deepest ecological footprints. Simply increasing basic literacy, as it is currently taught in most countries, will not produce sustainable societies. If communities and nations hope to identify and work toward sustainability goals, they must focus on skills, values, and perspectives that encourage and support public participation and community decision-making. Reorienting education to address sustainability is essential.The choice of content and emphasis is of utmost importance.

Reorienting existing education. An appropriately reoriented basic education includes more knowledge, principles, skills, perspectives, and values related to sustainability than are currently included in most education systems. Reorienting education also requires teaching and learning knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values that will guide and motivate people to pursue sustainable livelihoods, participate in a

5 Hopkins, Charles, Rosalyn McKeown, and International Network. 2005. Preliminary Draft Report - Guidelines and Recommendations for Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability. Toronto: York University.
6 UNESCO. 2005. Education for Sustainable Development. ESD Information Briefs. Online at http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30364&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [Accessed 16 May 2005].

democratic society, and live in a sustainable manner. Reorienting education must occur at every level – nursery school through university.

Developing public awareness. Sustainability requires a populace who is aware of the goals of a sustainable society and has the knowledge, skills, and values to contribute to those goals. The need for an informed, voting citizenry becomes ever more important with the increase in the number of democratic governments. Informed voting citizens, who lend support to enlightened policies and government initiatives, can help governments enact sustainable measures. In contrast, an uninformed public can undermine sustainability programmes. Effective public awareness programmes combined with realistic options for alternative action also change behaviors and lifestyle choices.

Providing Training. A literate and environmentally aware citizenry and workforce will help and guide nations as they implement sustainability plans. All sectors – including business, industry, higher education, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and community organizations – should be encouraged to train their leaders in environmental management and equity policies, for example, and to provide training in sustainable practices to their workers.

Each of the four thrusts of ESD must include elements of quality. The four thrusts imply that the formal, non-formal, and informal educational sectors of the educational community must work together to create an ESD programme for an entire community, region, or nation.

A Life-Skills Approach

"At the centre of quality education for all is the development of life skills".[7]

Quality education calls for using a life-skills approach in education and ESD calls for including skills in reorienting education to address sustainability. Learning a variety of skills will prepare individuals for a more successful life at home, in their communities, and in the workforce. People use a variety of skills in the full range of human activities: interacting with family and community members and when acting as an individual, a member of a group, and an employee or entrepreneur. Rather than simply letting individuals learn skills by observing people live and interact around them, educational systems intentionally teach a breadth of skills. In a life-skills approach to education, students become aware of, develop, use, and practice a wide variety of skills within the safety of the learning environment.

Young people now need skills that will help them adapt to changes over a lifetime. They need skills in each of the four pillars of Education For All – learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and with others, and learning to be.[8] Individuals need cognitive, reflective, self-management, and social skills. Life skills allow individuals to bridge what they currently know and do and what they can know and do in the future.[9]

Like quality education and ESD, the life-skills approach must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate and must be designed for a specific cultural and geographic context. Because cultural customs and the skills that go with them vary greatly from place to place, it is essential that life-skills programmes be created locally.

7 UNESCO. 2005. Draft Life Skills: The Bridge to Human Capabilities. Paris: UNESCO
8 UNESCO. 2005. Draft Report of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Life Skills in EFA. Paris: UNESCO.
9 UNESCO. 2005b. Focusing Resources on Effective School Health.
Online at http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.phpURL_ID=36637&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html. [Accessed 16 May 2005.]

As a result, the life-skills component of curriculums will vary greatly around the world.

Life-Long Learning Skills

In quality education by moving away from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction and learning, students are getting life-long learning skills earlier in their educational careers. Students begin developing mental habits (e.g., formulating questions, expressing ideas, and making decisions), which will empower them throughout their lives.

Life-long learning skills and opportunities, which allow adults to develop new skills and keep life-long employment, are part of quality education and ESD visions. The knowledge base and technical skills adult populations learned as children and teenagers during the 1960s, 1970s, and earlier, have become outdated today. For the individual, having life-long learning abilities to upgrade skills means having greater personal adaptability and employment flexibility. Such flexibility of employment contributes to family economic stability, reducing the economic divide between the very poor and the remainder of society. Life long learning skills also help adults to adapt socially and to participate in community-decision making as the places they live change.

UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: An Opportunity for Quality Education and Life Skills Approach

Quality education, a life-skills approach, and ESD are inextricably linked. Teaching and learning life skills are part of both quality education and ESD. Good ESD is an example of quality education. Ultimately, quality education is part of achieving international development targets; in doing so, it must foster sustainability. As an adaptive concept, quality education can be applied to a variety of disciplinary and educational reforms in the full range of educational settings. Furthermore, addressing quality as an essential part of ESD allows ESD to go into the mainstream of formal education. Addressing quality permits administrators and teachers to address issues facing their nations and school systems. In some regions, addressing enrolling and retaining female children in school is a high priority. In contrast, such programmes have been successful in other countries, but retaining male teenagers in secondary school is also a major problem.

The DESD provides a vehicle to address quality. As national ministries of education reorient educational systems and strategies to address sustainability as encouraged in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 59/237, they can also add elements of quality education such as participatory learning, life-skills, and human rights. The DESD provides nations, provinces, communities, and schools the opportunity to create quality education for sustainable development for all citizens.

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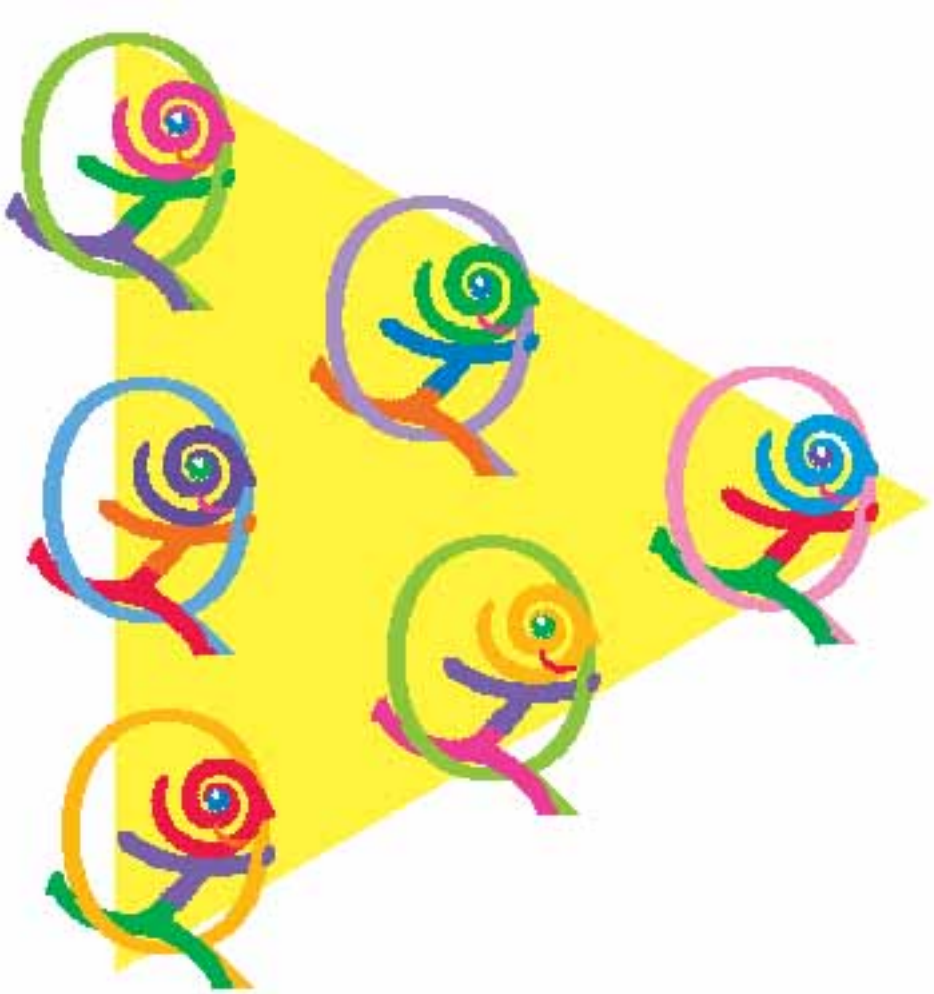

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