Sustainability Literacy

Sustainability is an increasingly central concept, both in social practice and in scientific, economic and even political fields. The promotion of sustainability literacy is critical in enabling informed civic participation.

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability was first introduced in education worldwide by the UNESCO-UNEP International Environmental Education Program in 1975.

What is exactly sustainability? The following proposal seems a relevant contribution to the definition of this concept:

Sustainability is often spoken of in terms of the "Three Es" – economics, ecology, and (social) equity. The commonly accepted definition of general sustainability usually invokes a vision of human welfare that takes into consideration inter- and intra-generational equity, and which does not exceed the limits of natural resource bases. In other words, it is a vision of a society which neither borrows from future generations nor lives at the expense of current generations[1].
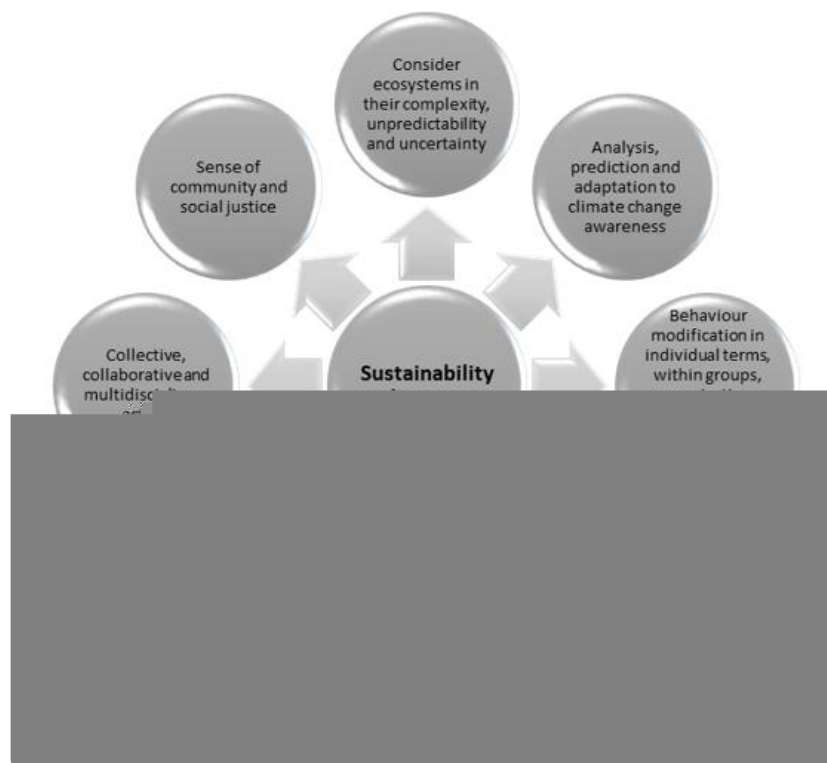
Yarime et al. (2012)[2] define the concept of Education for Sustainable Development as

"[…] a dynamic concept utilizing all aspects of public awareness, education, and training to create and enhance an understanding of the linkages among the diverse issues of sustainable development, of which the objective is to develop the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values that will empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future" (p. 104).

2. Develpoment

The United Nations proposes 17 SDGs that go far beyond sheer environmental sustainability, encompassing areas as broad as eradication of poverty and hunger; promotion of health and well-being for all; access of all to education; empowerment of women and gender equality; sustainable management of natural resources; sustainable economic growth and full employment; promotion of sustainable industrialization and innovation; reduction of asymmetries between countries; promotion of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities; fight against climate change and its impacts; preservation and sustainable development of marine and terrestrial ecosystems; promotion of inclusive societies; access to justice for all; and, in general, strengthening of the implementation of sustainable development[3]. For all of the above, for sustainable development, several dimensions have to be considered, such as the economic, the social and the environmental dimensions.

In terms of sustainability literacy, the United Nations[4] defines this concept as "[…] the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that help compel an individual to become deeply committed to building a sustainable future and allow him or her to make informed and effective decisions to this end". Furthermore, "As Sustainable Development is by nature complex and transversal, achieving sustainability literacy requires multidisciplinary approaches and exploration not only of various themes (e.g. soil quality, forest health, social inclusion, etc.) within sustainable development but also the interconnectedness of these themes"[5]

Source: Adapted from Ansari and Stibbe (2009)[6].

Figure 1. Sustainability literacy and associated skills and competences

UNESCO (2017)[7] sustains that education is vital to foster sustainability competences, and advocates the centrality of education "for the achievement of sustainable development, and Education for Sustainable Development is particularly needed because it empowers learners to make informed decisions and act responsibly for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations" (p. 63).

To conclude, education for sustainable development (ESD) is, more than ever, an overriding need and is an integral part of political, social, economic and educational agendas. Therefore, it should be developed at all levels of schooling, inasmuch that environmentally friendly behaviours, broadly considered, can and should be taught/learnt, promoted and even rewarded so that environmental awareness can be embedded in students since the first moment.

This uncertainty and complexity of ESD are reinforced by UNESCO (2017)[7] recommendations. The organization claims that there is no "one size fits all" version of ESD. Political and socio-cultural realities and specific environmental and ecological challenges make a contextual grounding of ESD critical. That is why there is a need for locally and nationally relevant interpretations of ESD and related forms of education[7].

Note: This entry is based on Serpa, S., & Sá, M. J. (2019). Exploring sociology of education in the promotion of sustainability literacy in higher education. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, (5)1, 101–116. https://doi.org/10.32861/jssr.51.101.116. For further development, see Serpa, S., & Sá, M. J. (2019) and the references the references mentioned on it.

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