Informal ESD in a community development context is overlooked: What theoretical frame can fit it?

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The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14), aimed to take a socially critical and transformative approach to education for sustainable development (ESD) through all forms of education. Unfortunately, it focused mainly on formal education and overlooked the informal education embedded in community development efforts that tackle real life problems, especially of marginalised people. Besides the political and economic pressures that cause the gap, arguably, current theorising in ESD, which draws from critical theories in school education, provides little guidance on appropriate pedagogical practice in community development. Theorising informal education in a community development is needed for ESD to respond the local community problems, and decoloniality is a potential approach.

Rhetoric-reality gap in the UNDESD

At the start of the UNDESD, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promised to integrate a socially critical and transformative approach to ESD. The action plan for the UNDESD clearly outlined a critical approach in which ESD integrated socially critical and transformative principles through all forms of education, including formal, non-formal and informal education through lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2005, p. 6). ESD is closely related to Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainability (EfS). There are ongoing arguments about the differences and similarities between EE, EfS and ESD but there is the one common thread behind these agreement is the critical approach. As its preposition, "for", of ESD represents, ESD conceptually draws mostly on the theoretical discourses which adopt a critical approach to environmental education, particularly "education *for* the environment" and "education *for* sustainability" by writers such as Fien (1993) and Huckle (1993, 1996a, 2002). Despite using this critical definition, the

UNDESD promoted ESD mainly in the areas of formal education and schooling and overlooked the overlap between informal education and community development.

Informal education in community development context carries key components of a critical approach to ESD. In this area, the efforts are made in a real life context targeting the vast majority of people who are not engaged with school education, particularly of the marginalised people, who are not reached by the governments or international organisations. The informal learning process is embedded in the practice, where the stakeholders learn each other, take action and create a new knowledge for the local community, including indigenous and local knowledge. This process itself is a *praxis* (Freire, 1972).

Over the years, environmental educators have pointed, once the words for critical approach are incorporated into the policy documents, these tended to have been "diluted and deleted" through the policy implementation (Greenall, 1981). Wals and Huckle (2015) note that the UNDESD failed in redirecting education to face the global unsustainable problems. The UNDESD overlooked, informal education in a community development from the perspectives of ESD, it repeated the another pattern of dilution and deletion in the policy implementation for ESD.

Problems of the theoretical framework

Two factors have caused the rhetoric-reality gap in the UNDESD. Firstly, as educators have pointed out over the years, the political and economic pressures for modernisation or economic growth around educational policies have contributed to the gap. These pressures have influenced the understanding of and approach to EE, EfS and ESD in a particular way, regarding concept (sustainable development), process (education), and content (knowledge). Secondly, it could be argued that current, theoretical discourses on education and sustainable development have not been able to address the issues which are tackled in community development. Very little research has been undertaken on informal ESD. Of the research that is available, descriptive case reports of introducing sustainable development efforts with limited analysis of how and why these are educational, or understanding informal ESD by only looking at a part where in schooling concept can be applied. Otherwise, the most theoretical discourses on critical approaches to EE, EfS and ESD look at formal education context. Because of lack of theoretical frame for informal ESD in community development context, it is hard for critical ESD to be effectively promoted or implemented.

This point could be explored by investigating the central conceptual ground where critical approaches are drawing on. Most theorising in EE, EfS and ESD has been drawn from critical sociology theories, such as the discursive communicative action theory of Habermas in 1980-90s (Huckle, 1993, 1996b). Methods and approaches such as workshop style learning, facilitation and multistakeholder dialogues have been developed based on the critical theorising of EE and EfS. However, these targets mostly school education and the relevance and applicability of the critical approach to community development is still

unclear, particularly to marginalised people. Before creating a space for the multistakeholders workshop, many issues need to be analysed, such as the power relationship between the stakeholders and between the different knowledge that they have, the languages that they use, and the learning process. Without these, the multistakeholders dialogue may merely create the process to cut some part out of the vast indigenous/local knowledge system, interpreted favouring to the dominant society and its knowledge system, not to the body of the knowledge that the marginalized community people might have. While making efforts to change the social structure, may decontextualising the socially-marginalised from the current society and reconstructing their own smaller structure be an alternative option that a critical approach to ESD could provide?

Decoloniality is a possible approach

Decoloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsuheni, 2013) can help to advance a critical approach to informal ESD in community development particularly in knowledge and understanding. It aims not only to identify the power issues relating to marginalisation from the perspectives of the marginalised, but also to establish an epistemology from their perspectives and ultimately to make possible a dialogue between the powerful and the marginalised in society. ESD may have a role to play in this process. Currently, following the UNDESD, the global education community is seeking further direction for ESD in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. UNESCO is keen to continue promoting ESD in this process, and they have developed the *Global Action Programme (GAP)* on ESD to advance this aim (UNESCO, 2014). In the GAP on ESD local community is one of the key focus areas for promoting ESD (UNESCO, 2014). If decoloniality is not used to theorise informal education in a community development context as part of this process, there is a high risk that the problem of dilution and deletion of critical words from ESD definition will be repeated in the policy implementation, even at the end of SDGs.

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