

Philip Higgs

Education for sustainable development and the virtue of education

Summary

In this article I shall critically reflect on the discourse of education for “sustainable development”. When referring to the virtue of education, I shall argue that the discourse on education for “sustainable development” should be informed not only by economic, environmental and sociological considerations, but also by an educational content which regards education as a matter of personal engagement. Such an educational content will ensure the safeguarding of the virtues which sustain a human/e world and the self-empowerment of people.

Onderwys vir volhoubare ontwikkeling en die deugsamheid van onderwys

In hierdie artikel word krities besin oor die diskoers rondom “volhoubare ontwikkeling”. Met verwysing na die deugsamheid van onderwys word die mening uitgespreek dat die diskoers oor onderwys vir “volhoubare ontwikkeling” nie slegs ekonomiese en sosiologiese oorwegings moet verreken nie, maar dat ’n benadering tot onderwys wat persoonlike betrokkenheid impliseer, ook betrek moet word. Sodanige benadering sal deugde verseker wat sowel ’n menswaardige wêreld as selfbemaagtiging van mense onderskraag.

Prof P Higgs, Dept of Educational Studies, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, Pretoria 0003; E-mail: higgsp@unisa.ac.za

In recent years the discourse on education for “sustainable development” has impacted significantly on educational debates concerning economic, environmental and social issues.¹ At times it has been argued that educators face a compelling responsibility to serve society by fostering the transformations needed to set us on the path to sustainable development. In fact, it is felt that the time has come to ensure that education for “sustainable development” be woven into the framework upon which current and future educational policy is based. As stated in *Agenda 21*, the document produced by the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, education is critical to the promotion of “sustainable development”. What this means, in short, is that not only children but also all citizens need to be educated about the economic and environmental realities of today’s world. The National Forum on Partnerships Supporting Education about the Environment (1994) endorsed this view in calling for a concept of education which included “sustainable development”. But what is “sustainable development”?

1. Definitions of “sustainable development” and education

It is important that we establish exactly what we mean by this term, because definitions of “sustainable development” will determine the nature of the educational policies and practices that seek to achieve it.

The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the so-called Brundtland Commission), entitled *Our common future* (1987), first linked sustainable development with education. Sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Commission, encompasses the economic objectives and environmental protection which make for a sustainable society. The interrelationship of economic objectives and environmental protection is also taken up in a recent publication by Hawken *et al* (2001), entitled *Natural capitalism: creating the next industrial revolution*. In this volume, the authors explore the lucrative opportunities for business in an era of approaching environmental limits, arguing that “education for sustainable deve-

1 Cf, for example, Bak 1995; Cross 1998; Fien 1993; Filho 2000; Jickling 1997, 1999; Jickling & Spork 1998 & Sauvé 1996, 1999.

lopment” must take cognisance of, and develop, such business and environmental acumen in order to generate greater profitability. In 1996, the President’s Council on Sustainable Development broadened the definition of “sustainable development” to include social equity, alongside certain economic objectives and environmental protection.

Filho (2000: 9) claims that a definition of “sustainable development” depends on its context and may have many meanings, such as:

- the modality of development that enables countries to progress economically and socially without destroying their environmental resources;
- the type of development which is socially just, ethically acceptable, morally fair and economically sound, or
- the type of development in which environmental indicators are as important as economic indicators.

All these definitions of “sustainable development” are what Jickling & Spork (1998: 313-4) call “programmatic definitions”, that is, they are prescriptive in that they assign a particular programme of intent to the development being undertaken. Such a programme of intent could be economic, social, environmental or moral. When understood in the context of “education for sustainable development”, these definitions suggest that the aim of education is something external to education itself. In other words, education can and must be *for* something. This immediately raises the question as to whether education should aim to advance particular ends such as, for example, sustainable development. Moreover, should the task of education be to make people behave and think in a particular way respecting economic, social, environmental and moral programmes? Affirmative responses to these questions reveal the subservience of education to ideological practices of intent.

2. Education for sustainable development as an ideological practice

It is apparent from definitions of the concept “sustainable development” that the concept is based on economic, environmental and social issues. In other words, these are the issues that chiefly determine

what “sustainable development” should be directed towards. In fact, the economy-environment-society triad which forms the basis of the theoretical framework of sustainable development nowhere makes reference to education as an important consideration in determining what should constitute “sustainable development” in the pursuit of a better quality of life for all. At most, education is seen as a process of information transfer (mainly scientific, technical and legislative information) which aims at ensuring environmental “conformity” by adhering to economically acceptable norms. Given this neglect of the question “What actually constitutes education?”, the concept of “sustainable development” is vulnerable to an ideologically and utilitarianly driven content which emphasises the performative demands of a technological rationality, a rationality which focuses solely on the economic, environmental and socially determined functions of society. As a result, the adoption of the “sustainable development” credo in education, as Sauv  (1996: 8) points out, seems to present a major problem. In the light of this, I shall argue in this essay that due consideration needs to be given to education “itself” in determining how education for “sustainable development” can be pursued in order to bring about the economic, environmental and social changes demanded by the advent of the twenty-first century. In developing this line of argument, attention will be paid to what I term the virtue of education, an interpretation of education which recognises education as a matter of personal engagement rather than ideological practice.

3. The virtue of education

3.1 The notion of “virtue”

The notion of virtue is a common translation of the Greek word for excellence: *ar te*. The *aretai*, the excellences or virtues, were simply the qualities that made a particular life exemplary, good, admirable, or excellent. The interesting point about virtues, however, is that they were not reducible to rules or moral principles. In other words, virtue was not perceived in a restricted moral sense but instead were regarded as being an enduring excellence of character that was reflected in specific human action. Seen in this light virtues reveal a person’s educated character. It is the possession of virtues that tells us whether someone

is well-prepared for certain life tasks and responsibilities. Aristotle (1962: 45) argued that virtues were commonly acquired through the formation of the good habits or customs that parents instil in their children. Good parents and educators teach children good habits that are becoming to the well-educated and the good person.

However, Aristotle also argued that virtues could not be strengthened or advanced in the absence of what he called “practical reasoning”. Practical reasoning does not tell us what virtues to embrace; it is, rather, a means of determining how to act virtuously in this or that situation, in other words, a critical reflection on the enactment of human agency. The problem is seldom, therefore, whether or not to be compassionate or courageous, but what it means to act courageously or compassionately in a particular situation. Such deliberations are highly responsive to emotions, feelings, purposes and desires and require a finely developed capacity to reason and judge in the whole undertaking of critical thinking.

Initially, this proposition may seem outworn and old-fashioned, reminiscent of what Kohlberg (1985: 18) calls the berated “bag-of-virtues approach” of yesteryear. However, every age has its politically correct or philosophically correct language and forms of knowledge. And even though the concept of virtue is being revived by contemporary philosophers interested in the practical import of virtue ethics for everyday life, it may be difficult at the beginning of the twenty-first century to make educators ardently aware of the relevance of thinking about their professional practices in terms of virtues. The term virtue still awakens old-fashioned associations of pious obedience to some prevailing morality. Indeed, virtuousness seems to imply the very opposite of a vigorously critical reflective personality. To talk of the virtues of education may call forth memories of servile teachers trapped in the suffocating atmosphere of small-minded, intolerant patriarchal communities. However, we need to remind ourselves that the ancient notion of a virtue was very different — it specifically referred to the quality of strong personality. The modern notion of virtue, as employed by virtue ethicists, also propagates virtuous action as that which requires both the enabling practice of personal choice and self-responsible agency.

3.2 Education and the practice of virtue

Central to the present discussion, then, is the suggestion that the practice of education relies on the unique and particular features of virtues. The thoughtfulness and tact that educators learn to display depends upon the internalised values, embodied qualities and thoughtful habits that constitute education as a virtue. Thus it can be said that virtues are the learned and evoked educational qualities that are necessary for education, as the outcome of human agency, to take place. Virtues form the content that makes much educational reflection practical and possible in the first place. Even in reflective moments, when we wonder, “How should I have acted? What should I have done? How should I have responded?” we are usually appealing to practical knowledge that is best accounted for in those personal experiences that are contextualised in particular, unique and concrete human situations. For MacIntyre (1981: 148) this means that virtues are precisely those qualities whose possession will enable a person to achieve their *telos* as a human being and the lack of which will frustrate a person’s movement toward this *telos*. No doubt several questions present themselves: “How do we know what these qualities may be? Can the virtues of education be taught? What is the relation between virtues and critical reflection?”

In response, I would suggest that some human actions that would be morally neutral in the general population could be regarded as educational virtues, bearing in mind that virtues, as the outcome of human actions, are never morally neutral but always normatively desirable. Human actions which would have to be contextualised and which might well be perceived as the virtuous manner in which educators would be called upon to act in response to the deliberations of daily life may include the following: patience, trust, having special knowledge, and the ability to understand the meaning and significance of difficulty and personal suffering, love and caring, a deep sense of responsibility, moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, tactful sensitivity towards the other person’s subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence, an understanding of the other person’s needs, improvisational resoluteness in dealing with other people, a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world, the moral fibre to stand up for something, a certain under-

standing of the world, active hope in the face of prevailing crises, and, not least, humour and vitality. These qualities, though obviously contestable, might well be perceived as the manner in which educators would act in response to the deliberations of daily life that are connected to the possession and exercise of virtue.

This, therefore, means that the formation of one's educational identity is ultimately dependent on the evocation of virtue-like acts of education which each person should learn to interpret and embody into a form of knowing that contributes to his or her educational identity. The problem of a person's educational identity, however, requires further elaboration by way of a critical consideration of the nature of education, for it is education that provides such an identity with form, content and vitality.

4. The nature of education

4.1 Education and empowerment

Education is a contested concept. In entering this contestation, I would argue at the outset that education is not an abstract concept or a substantial phenomenon as asserted in certain discourses on education.² Rather, education is the outcome of human agency which is differentiated in those deliberations on daily life that take place around the possession and exercise of virtue. In this instance, education is a matter of personal engagement.

This notion of the nature of education is far removed from the crude idea that the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills is education. Education is not the same thing as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, though it is recognised that the mastery of knowledge and skills is an inherent feature of education. The empowerment of a person with knowledge and skills does not necessarily make for an educated person. What is important is the use that persons make of their knowledge and skills, their value to them personally in their thinking and living; it is what the acquisition of knowledge and skills has done to their minds, their attitudes, their ideas, their values, their

2 Cf, for example, Dearden 1972; Dewey 1998; Hirst 1970; Marshall 1995; Peters 1979; Phillips 2000; Popkewitz & Fendler 1999 & Zecha 1999.

ideals, their motives and intentions that will allow them to be considered as educated persons.

Education should not, therefore, be regarded as the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills. Instead, education should be seen as an attempt to bring influences to bear that will empower the person's character, abilities and capacities with a sense of personal meaning. Education is, thus, an activity directed at self-empowerment, whereby people are equipped for the task of living meaningfully, guided in their aims and actions by their differential experience of human agency.

4.2 The ethical ethos of education

In focusing its attention on human agency, education concerns itself dynamically with the formation of ideals, thereby fostering an appreciation of the highest standards in motive, judgement and action. As a result education encompasses a person's total experience of existence, of the arts, of the finer achievements of technology and science, and of beauty. In being responsible for the formation of ideals, education contributes to the formation of character, which includes the promotion of respect for, and valuing of individuality. Education means "leading out" the individual nature in each man and woman to its true fullness and so bringing about the expression of their individual uniqueness.

These observations indicate that education has certain ethical implications; it has inbuilt criteria implying that something excellent should be transmitted. Education implies a commitment to what is thought and experienced as valuable and meaningful. Education, therefore, has to do with living life meaningfully, and this involves much more than the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or skills for the sake of professional and vocational competency. Education involves personal transformation and change, a continual becoming. In this way, education and change are shown to be dynamically interdependent, for without education there can be no change and without change there can be no education. In educational encounters between people, knowledge and understanding are passed on in such a way that they develop a life of their own in the unique experience of each person while at the same time bringing about a transformation of how the person sees and feels about the world.

It is thus evident that the ethical nature of education means that education is fundamentally concerned not with the acquisition of knowledge, or with professional and vocational skills competence, but with assisting a person in learning how to think, to understand, to appreciate, to make use of knowledge and to discover its inherent values, its usefulness, its clarifying and revealing powers, its insights, and its truth.

4.3 Education as personal engagement

The discourse on education for “sustainable development” in the twenty-first century is making its demands on people and on society as a whole. In this discourse people are confronted by the demands of a technocratic dispensation which requires them to obtain the knowledge and skills that will enable them to maintain and develop society’s scientifically, technologically and sociologically determined functions, and to promote the national economy. Such a technocratic dispensation regards people in terms of their pragmatic value for the advancement of the technocratic order which, it is believed, is the symbol of humankind’s advancement toward a more efficient and better world. In this technocratic world, education is directed at the attainment of pragmatic ends mainly concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills. As a result, education is reduced to mere training and vocational preparation, that is, to the technocratisation of people without due regard for their need for self-empowerment.

However, education as a matter of personal engagement is fundamentally concerned with a person’s self-empowerment as a human being. Such a concern is inter-subjective in nature in that it reaches out to others for the purposes of empowering the self with its own identity. This means that education is not primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills for professional and vocational preparedness, but rather with a person’s self-empowerment as this is realised in relation to other people. In this intersubjective experience of self-empowerment, it is argued that a person:

- should not be treated as an object or thing which is evaluated in terms of its utility value and productive capacity — instead, a person’s worth should be vested in his or her personal identity;

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- needs to become someone with his or her own unique and differentiated identity and should not merely be regarded as some useful or productive thing;
- needs to have his or her dignity and uniqueness acknowledged and respected;
- requires an interpersonal relationship of love in action in order to invest his or her existence with personal significance;
- needs to be supported in the responsible expression of his or her freedom.

In recognising the inter-subjective nature of human experience, education, as a matter of personal engagement, therefore, also emphasises a person's need for a form of social engagement in which he or she struggles to give form, character and meaning to the experience of his or her own unique existence. In this form of social involvement people are empowered to develop their own voices while at the same time acquiring their own personal and virtuous dispositions which allow them the opportunity to change themselves, to change others and, by implication, to change their world and society as a whole. In other words, in the act of self-empowerment, education is directed at helping people to become autonomous persons and engage in thought and activity which is their own, in the sense of not being determined by causes beyond their control. Such autonomous persons will exercise a critical disposition in relation to themselves, to others and to the world, and in acting independently will aspire to that most noble possible view of education, namely, that of the educated person whose empowering practice will be directed at a better life for all.

5. Education in the twenty-first century

The decade ushering in the twenty-first century has witnessed continuing and accelerating change in all spheres of human endeavour. In this climate of change, educators are compelled to seek new and more meaningful ways of understanding their place and task in society. In this search, it is suggested that educators remain true to a vision of education as a matter of personal engagement.

Humankind desperately needs to work toward a renewed consciousness about the future of human existence. Unless humankind develops the wisdom to manage its societies, its environment and its existence, more people will suffer in the coming decades than ever before. The dilemma facing educators is not one of too little knowledge. If anything, it is one of too much knowledge, or rather, it is the dilemma of not knowing how knowledge can be transformed into wisdom. There is a growing concern that the amount of knowledge available is outstripping humankind's intellectual and ethical capacity for handling its growth and complexity.

Humankind currently possesses enough knowledge to destroy itself or to improve people's quality of life on earth. The twenty-first century witnesses to the most diversified, least integrated and most diffusely applied knowledge which humankind has yet produced. It is also the most exact knowledge in specific, fragmented areas, and the most operational. That it has produced the greatest disorder in the household of humankind is little wonder. It is likewise obvious that unless humankind integrates and focuses its knowledge this disorder will grow into disaster and catastrophe.

The most important reconciliation that has to occur in the twenty-first century is between the ethical principles of human nature and the factual foundations of the natural sciences. During the last two centuries, values and facts have become progressively divorced. In the process people have become estranged from the object of their study. Great thinkers as Goethe, Nietzsche, Hegel, Schiller, Schopenhauer and Credo Mutwa have tried to effect a synthesis between values and facts based on the primacy of human values.

It would seem, however, that at present much of our educational endeavour negates the primacy of human values; this is because this endeavour is moulded to the dictates of a scientific paradigm that is naturalistic, objective, analytical and directed at operational and functional ends. In the ensuing estrangement a person becomes an alienated self. This estrangement needs to be addressed as a matter of the utmost urgency. This will require creative thought and innovative action. In addressing this sense of estrangement and alienation, educators will need both courage and inspired determination. They should not allow their vision of the primacy of human values to stag-

nate within existing political and social structures. Instead, they should be prepared to participate in the transformation and renewal of educational form and substance so as to ensure that human concerns and aspirations are neither neglected nor altogether ignored. This will mean that, in their striving for transformation and renewal, educators will confront the future with a flexibility of vision that will seek to bring about innovation and change in the interests of people and ultimately of society as a whole. This, in turn, will require educational discourse to be rooted in a commitment to change so that educators may be free to enquire, explore and be creative.

Educators are at the service of educational systems which are prescriptive in function. Prescriptive education makes independent, critical thinking extremely difficult. Conformity is demanded or expected, which leads to mediocrity and the demise of creative endeavour. This demise in turn results in the neglect of human concerns and aspirations. Educational systems today do not merely neglect human concerns; they simply do not have enough respect for the dignity, worth and uniqueness of a person's existence as a human being. Educational systems tend to kill innovation and stifle creativity, and in so doing to estrange and alienate people from themselves. The constant compliance required by an educational system leaves a person little, if any, opportunity to develop a value system and a self-concept based on internal rather than externally imposed criteria. And the resultant damage to the human spirit may prompt one to conclude that educational systems are perhaps the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions of humankind.

The issue of the survival of the human spirit, as well as the environment in which that spirit is housed, during the present epoch, constitutes the problem of elevating a person's quality of existence. The discourse on education for "sustainable development" can significantly impact on attempts directed at addressing this very human problem. However, in order to do so, the discourse on education for "sustainable development" will need to ensure that it makes room for an educational content which not only acknowledges, but also practises the virtue of education, with due regard for education as a matter of personal engagement.

5. Conclusion

At the outset of this essay I suggested that the discourse on education for “sustainable development” is vulnerable to an ideologically driven educational practice which emphasises that persons be educated for the maintenance and development of environmentally and sociologically determined functions, and for the promotion of the national economy. This utilitarian practice in education regards people solely in terms of their utility value to the advancement of a new social order which, some believe, is the symbol of humankind’s advancement. In this new social order, however, where education is directed at the attainment of utilitarian ends without due regard for the self-empowerment of people, the real danger exists that the practice of education will be corrupted in the service of a so-called environmentally sound and economically prosperous future. In other words, if the discourse on education for “sustainable development” is driven only by ideologically conceived utilitarian outcomes, to the exclusion of educational considerations, then such a discourse makes itself vulnerable to ideological distortion and exploitation. It has been argued that if the discourse on education for “sustainable development” is to inform our policies and practices in education, we need to ensure that it is not corrupted by ideologically and utilitarianly driven educational policies and practices which emphasise the performative demands of a technological rationality. Instead, it is proposed, the discourse on education for “sustainable development” be informed not only by economic, environmental and sociological considerations but also by an educational content which I have referred to as the virtue of education. Such an educational content will be concerned with the virtues that sustain a human/e world and that are at the same time directed at, in the words of Jickling (1992: 8), “the optimal development of people, with an emphasis on autonomy and critical thinking”. Furthermore, I have also argued that insofar as virtues are an affirmation of an inherent bond among all human beings, we should ensure that the qualities inherent in those virtues which education seeks to promote are not sacrificed to pragmatic motives which seek to compel educational discourse to be subservient to the political, economic, and social demands of a rapidly changing technocratic world.

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If we fail to include such a content of education in the discourse on education for “sustainable development”, then there is a real danger that educational policies and practices in this discourse will be corrupted by the performative demands of an economic and technological rationality. If this happens, the discourse on education for “sustainable development” will be informed by an economic, rather than an educational conception of the quality of life.

In reflecting on the course of human history, H G Wells (1972: 10) commented: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe”. In the light of that remark, it can be concluded that the interest of education is none other than civilisation itself, that is, the quality of humankind’s existence. In pursuing this interest, education subsumes the concerns of the body politic and the market in the interests of humankind’s need for enlightenment, to ensure a quality of existence that is becoming to civilised people. This value-laden activity is the content of education, which the discourse on education for “sustainable development” should include in its deliberations on a better quality of life for all. In short, if the discourse on education for “sustainable development” is to work towards a better quality of life for all, then the virtue of education should be acknowledged and encouraged in the educational policies and practices that sustain such a discourse.

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