



May 2021

Educating for Well-Being Contribution to GTI Forum The Pedagogy of Transition

Timothy Bedford

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a global project championed by UNESCO. The organization has presided over the Decade of ESD (2005-2014) and the Global Action Plan that followed. ESD has become part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and UNESCO now focuses on Target 4.7 of SDG 4, which aims to ensure that by 2030 all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development through ESD.

So far so good, but I want to point out the elephant in the room: the SDGs are built on a foundation of economic growth, and as such, they are unsustainable. Given limits to decoupling growth from ecological impacts, more economic growth will lead to an increase in material and energy use and contribute to environmental degradation, more CO2 emissions, climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and mass extinction. So-called green growth is therefore an illusion. As Nada Bogović and Saša Čegar point out, in the long run a "sustainable economy may exist only in a sustainable symbiosis with the natural system, upholding natural laws and respecting natural limits of economic growth."¹ Therefore, as economic growth is the means to achieve the SDG goals, this will result in further degradation of the planet.

Mainstream ESD is complicit in a growth fetishism that is destroying the planet. For example, UNESCO's 2016 report *Education for People and Planet: Creating Sustainable Futures* demonstrates the importance the organization places on economic growth:

- "Education contributes to **economic growth**." (p. 38)
- "If education is to continue to drive **growth**, it must keep up with the rapidly changing world of work." (p.16)

- *"A future where **economic growth** does not exacerbate inequalities but builds prosperity for all."*
(Foreword)
- *"Education of good quality can help ensure **economic growth** does not leave anyone behind."*
(p. 38)²

Furthermore, economic growth is mentioned seventeen times in the UN's 2015 SDGs resolution 70/1, while planetary boundaries are not discussed at all.³ SDG 8 is dedicated entirely to decent work and economic growth. Such frameworks, with their embrace of economic growth, are therefore incompatible with environmental sustainability, especially given that developed countries are *already* in ecological overshoot. In order to create sustainable societies, we need to curb excessive consumption of resources so that we can live within the earth's carrying capacity. Today, humanity uses the equivalent of 1.7 Earths to provide the resources we use and to absorb our waste. As Mathis Wackernagel et al. point out, "Ranking high on the SDG index strongly correlates with high per person demand on nature (or 'Footprints'), and low ranking with low Footprints, making evident that the SDGs as expressed today vastly underperform on sustainability."⁴

Given the economic growth imperative of the SDGs and ESD, what challenges does this pose for sustainability education? E.F. Schumacher reminds us that "[t]he volume of education continues to increase, yet so do pollution, exhaustion of resources, and the dangers of ecological catastrophe. If still more education is to save us, it would have to be education of a different kind: an education that takes us into the depth of things."⁵ With this in mind, I will share a grassroots Transformative Education for Gross National Happiness (GNH) action research project I carried out with teachers in Bhutan. GNH is Bhutan's unique overarching development goal with socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and political pillars. This holistic sustainability paradigm is attributed to the 4th King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who in 1972 stated that GNH is more important than GNP (Gross National Product). In other words, happiness and well-being are more important than material wealth.

The project developed a transformative pedagogy for a Leadership Training Course (LTC) to empower participating teachers to promote GNH and a sustainable future. Seven schools from

Paro, Bhutan, participated in the LTC, during which teachers designed initiatives to infuse their schools with GNH practices and principles. The theoretical framework for the transformative pedagogy of the LTC is rooted in critical pedagogies, GNH and Buddhist values and ethics, and strong sustainability principles that respect ecological integrity and planetary boundaries. The framework is an example of critical Education for Sustainability that reveals structural causes and goes to the depth of un/sustainability. During the LTC, teachers developed skills in action research, transformative pedagogy, media literacy, and ICT across the curriculum to promote Education for GNH. At the end of the LTC, teachers produced a GNH action research plan to implement in their schools. The resulting transformative pedagogy of the LTC is characterized by seven pedagogical principles:

1. **Ethical:** Shared strong sustainability values and ethical principles bind school communities together and guide educational transformation for GNH.
2. **Conscientizing:** Conscientization is a praxis to develop critical understanding as a basis for action to transform schools and society.
3. **Activist:** The activist principle concerns the channeling of critical understanding into critical action to transform schools and society.
4. **Situated:** The situated principle refers to place-based education that is important and relevant to the life experiences of learners.
5. **Diversity-Affirming:** This principle is concerned with the importance of valuing diversity in schools, society, and nature.
6. **Researching:** In order to transform schools, there is a need to connect the theory and practice of GNH (Sustainability), e.g., through action research.
7. **Participatory:** The participatory principle is teaching and learning that is experiential, dialogical, inquiry-based, democratic, and engaged with hand, heart, and mind.

One year after the course, there was a follow-up where teachers shared the work they had done in their schools and communities and made new action research plans. A year later, there was a project evaluation which revealed the power of teacher action research and transformative

pedagogy to provide a solid foundation for transforming Bhutan's education system to achieve the country's Gross National Happiness goals.⁶

Grassroots initiatives such as the one in Bhutan are important to develop transformative pedagogies for transition that are rooted in strong sustainability approaches to ESD and echo Schumacher's call for radical educational change. Jane Singer and Yoshiyuki Nagata call such grassroots initiatives "lower-case esd" to differentiate them from the "upper-case ESD" of UNESCO and national governments.⁷ The challenge for esd is knowing what to do when the SDGs promote a failing economic model that does not respect planetary boundaries and impedes the implementation of deep structural change needed for sustainability. ESD having become entangled with the SDGs makes it less likely that the hegemonic principles underpinning sustainable development will be critically examined, debated, tested, and applied. Nonetheless, a new strong sustainability paradigm is necessary that fosters well-being for all within the limits of a finite planet. Such a strong sustainability paradigm must become the foundation of ESD. In the meantime, with "upper-case ESD" locked into the growth paradigm, any hope for a sustainable future lies with local grassroots "lower-case esd" initiatives.

Endnotes

1. Nada Bogović and Saša Čegar, "Education Principles in a Model of Strong Sustainability," *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* 44 (2012): 10-19.
2. UNESCO, *Education for People and Planet: Creating Sustainable Futures for All* (Paris: UNESCO, 2016), <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2016/education-people-and-planet-creating-sustainable-futures-all>.
3. United Nations, *Resolution 70/1: Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.
4. Mathis Wackernagel et al., "Making the Sustainable Development Goals Consistent with Sustainability," *Frontiers in Energy Research* 5 (2017), <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fenrg.2017.00018>.

About the Author



Timothy Bedford is a teacher, researcher, and an educational activist in Finland. He has taught courses at Oulun Lyseon Lukio on economics and theory of knowledge and courses at Oulu University on sustainability and equity in education. He currently specializes in sustainability education, transformative pedagogies, and action research. He holds a PhD in Educational Sciences from Oulu University.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Timothy Bedford, "Educating for Well-Being," contribution to GTI Forum "The Pedagogy of Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-bedford>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.