Afterword: Ethical Literacies and Sustainability Education: Young People, Subjectivity and Democratic Participation

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We have entered the Anthropocene (Gibson et al. 2015), an era of human-caused global systemic dysfunction where the same species that caused this dysfunction also has the responsibility to turn the tide and respond. How to live lightly, equitably, meaningfully and empathically (i.e. towards the past and the future, towards different cultures, the non-human and more-than-human world) on Earth is the key question of our time. Young people in particular might feel overwhelmed by such a heavy existential question as they have a full life ahead of them and may have serious doubts about having children of their own some day in the face of the declining state of our planet. How can schools help young people to engage meaningfully in such a loaded question? Or, morally speaking, how can they choose not to help them with this question or, worse, make them powerless witnesses and accomplices to this planetary demise by ignoring this question altogether and sticking to "education-as-usual"?

This edited volume brings together authors who are looking for principles, foundations and processes that enable educators, in a broad sense, to connect young people with the key questions of our time. What does

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literacy mean in times of fluidity of meaning and the blurring of boundaries? What makes such literacies become ethical or, for that manner, less ethical or even unethical? Is there such a thing as democratic participation in a society that is "rigged" (to use one of the most used words in the recent US elections) towards elitist interests, corrupted by power and fuelled by distrust? These are all difficult, interrelated questions that do not have single or simple answers that can be frozen in time and spread across the globe as universal truths. Yet they are critical questions for educators in general and for sustainability educators working with young people in particular. They are so critical because they provide an entry point into a highly charged "grand dilemma" that seems to be ignored in the emerging field of education for sustainability or for sustainable development for that matter: what is it that needs to be sustained and what is it that needs to be disrupted or transgressed?

This collection written by authors connected to a Swedish international university that seeks to engage meaningfully with sustainable development—the University of Gothenburg—begins to address these difficult questions and by doing so provides a pathway into what Stephen Sterling sometimes refers to as "deep sustainability learning" (Sterling 2008), which addresses ontological questions about our existence as entangled in multiple realities and ways of knowing, and the blinding insights that govern our actions in education and beyond. The first so-called "track" in the book contains contributions that provoke a rethinking of instrumental interpretations of sustainability education that tend to have prescriptive and even moralistic undertones. Such interpretations fail to acknowledge the pluralism of thought and being in the world, and by doing so unwillingly amplify what we might call unsustainability.

In the second track this tension is developed further with a much needed normative probing of how to decide what is moral, right, ethical, fair and just. Authors are reflecting on the role of education in asking these questions and helping learners engage in them. Here I am reminded of a paper I was asked to write as a response to a special issue of *Environmental Education Research* on (environmental) education for sustainability in the Nordic countries—to be more precise, in Denmark and Sweden. The article, entitled "Between knowing what is right and knowing that is it wrong to tell others what is right: On relativism, uncertainty and democracy in E(E)SD", highlights the tension between the realizations on the one hand that "Earth is dying and we must act now" and on the other that "using education to tell people how to live their lives is counter-educational in

itself and a possible set-up for indoctrination and inculcation and the loss of democracy" (Wals 2010). The contributions from Sweden and Denmark tended to embrace a Bildung perspective of education (Biesta et al. 2013)—one that is more preoccupied with creating space for learning and democracy than with realizing specific predetermined learning outcomes. This preoccupation can be seen as stemming from having faith in the learners, trust in the teachers and the belief that the freedom to learn with and from each other in spaces that are conducive to exploration will inevitably lead to good outcomes, whatever they might be. However, this preference also seems to be rooted in an aversion to eco-totalitarianism and elitism.

There appears to be a downside to this post-modernist perspective because it implies that "anything goes", that your view is as good as mine, that we must be able to agree to disagree and that respectful dissensus is fine and even desirable. This makes judging problematic. Am I, in searching for a more sustainable world, "an ontology behind" those who have a more relational view of the world and are on a par with the non-human and the more-than-human world? Is a new materialist perspective preferred over a post-human perspective? Are some positions more moral than others, more ethical? And what about ontologies that we have yet to become aware of? This is an enormous challenge for environmental and sustainability educators. When, for instance, do we have the moral authority to say that one ontology is (more) right than others when the goal is moving towards a more sustainable world for all? Should educators not take an explicit stance in this respect and "just" engage learners in conversations, philosophical investigations and biophysical explorations in a way that will "lead" them to a more conscious way of being in the world, leaving it up to them to figure out whether they are comfortable with that or whether they prefer to transform to another way? This is what seems to be the main subject of track three.

Not surprisingly, undoubtedly, the many questions raised so far in this afterword won't be answered here. The point of emancipatory education is not so much providing answers but rather creating dialogue and discursive practices, establishing connections, entangling and untangling, framing and reframing, making the ordinary less ordinary, disrupting the undesirable, seeing and sensing, sensing place and identity, being and becoming, envisioning futures and, indeed, finding moral ground and associated ethical literacies to negotiate what is right in the light of existential questions. This fourth track touches most on envisioning education from such an emancipatory vantage point.

Weaving the tracks together and considering the book as a whole, I should like to draw what we might call a conclusion. This collection represents a plea for an urgent and timely expansion of the notion of literacy by incorporating ethical literacies, not by adding to an already overcrowded curriculum but rather by a systemic reorientation of teaching, education and learning that is less concerned with prescriptive moralistic sustainability education outcomes than with the provision of contexts for learning that afford and invite all of the above characteristics of what I would call emancipatory education with Earth in mind. Such an education is inevitably explorative by nature and needs to be sensitive to the context of which it is part, but what seems to be overarching is the incorporation of philosophical investigations and the reclaiming of intuitive knowing of the world. Paraphrasing Richard Rorty (1998) and linking his thinking to sustainability, we might say that sustainability suffers from our attempts to become more rigorous but benefits from our attempts to become more imaginative. It was, yet again, Albert Einstein who already pointed out that "knowledge is limited, whereas imagination encircles the world" (quoted in Tillmanns 2006, p. 1).

Creating space for imagination and intuitive knowing, combined with what we might call a "planetary consciousness and responsibility that transcends the human", lies at the heart of sustainability education. Such space will need to afford pluralism of ideas and the possibility of ontological encounters. We do not and cannot know what "the best" way of being in the world is, but we do know that the structures and social norms that hegemonic and globalizing Western colonial thought has created over hundreds of years, characterized by hierarchical, reductionist and polarizing ways of thinking, combined with the commodification of virtually everything (water, land, air, bodies, thought etc.), cannot be sustained. A "return to the things themselves" (Husserl 2001) and a reclaiming of intuitive knowing and innate empathy (de Waal 2009) will be necessary. As Martin Buber wrote, "In the beginning is relation – as a category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, *the inborn Thou*" (1958, p. 27). Tillmanns believes that it is this *a priori* relation which is the basis for the intuitive knowledge of the world we live in and are immersed in. She argues that we will always retain some form of this intuitive understanding of the world but that it is often replaced by the cognitive skills we develop in school. A consequence of this is that "our cognitive skills are developed in a vacuum, disassociated from our being (2016, p. 3). We might add to this: disassociated from

our becoming in a highly politicized world with contested claims and prefabricated moral positions about what is right and wrong.

This book makes a significant contribution to rethinking the role of education in times of systemic global dysfunction. The editors are to be complemented for bringing together such a rich mixture of scholars who walk tracks and pathways less travelled in sustainability education as a contested but undeniably emerging field. Further exploration will be needed both conceptually and practically using the range of innovative methodologies that contributors introduce. Nonetheless, we can already see some kind of convergence towards genius loci-based integral design of schools, urban spaces, homes and workplaces that breathe sustainability, well-being and inclusiveness while recognizing cycles and planetary boundaries. Such a convergence or transition is critical if "we"—all of "us" and all of "it" —are to continue to live on Earth together. Clearly, a systemic reorientation of education will need to take place that will allow young people to find and feel the pulse of sustainability as it expands and contracts with unpredictable rhythms, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes irregularly.

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Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by "n" denote notes.