

A Critical Review of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Japan: Beyond the Practice of Pouring New Wine into Old Bottles

NAGATA, Yoshiyuki*

Japan stands as a rare country in which ESD has been incorporated as mainstream policy. However, looking back on the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD), ESD has not brought about the transformation in Japan that one expects ESD to aim for, despite this support at the policy level. The cause may be that pouring the “new wine” of ESD into the “old bottle” of the traditional educational system has diluted the dynamism contained in ESD.

Both “shallow ESD” and “deep ESD” exist. The former stems mainly from widely shared interpretations of ESD that emphasize the overlap and connections with existing school subjects and types of education. The latter is needed to avoid this loss of dynamism and to gain access to the full potential of ESD. Holistic educational approaches that replace conventional ones, as well as system-level transformation, are indispensable to realize this “deep ESD.”

Keywords: ESD, UNESCO, transformation, holistic approach, sustainable development

I come to Johannesburg to join other distinguished world leaders in addressing the challenge of defining what must be done in order to ensure sustainable development for all. Our world is filled with harsh realities. Conflicts continue incessantly on the Earth. Still, we must determine the key factors in ensuring sustainable development once peace is achieved. I believe that the answer is “People.”

Japan, a country poor in natural resources, has grown to be what it is today on the strength of its human resources. It has attached paramount importance to education as the basis of development.

* University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo
e-mail: yoshy@pobox.com

My government, together with Japanese non-governmental organizations, has proposed that the United Nations declare a “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development”. We shall provide no less than 250 billion yen in education assistance over a five-year period.¹

– Junichiro Koizumi, former Prime Minister of Japan

The above quote from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002 is from a speech by Junichiro Koizumi in Johannesburg, Japan’s prime minister at the time. As he stated, Japan was the country that proposed the 2005-2014 United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD, hereafter ‘DESD’) to the United Nations. Further, in order to support the DESD, Japan has provided ongoing financial assistance in the form of a fund-in-trust, and hosted the culminating conference for the DESD. Thus, Japan is certainly a country that has contributed to advancing an international movement for ESD.

How has ESD fared in Japan, the country that first suggested its importance for an international educational movement? A number of reviews of ESD results have been published in Japanese (Japan’s Interagency Coordinating Council for ESD, 2014; ESD-J, 2015; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s Office of the Director General for International Affairs, 2015; ESD-J, 2016; Development Education Association and Resource Center (DEAR), 2016). There have been only a few studies emphasizing ESD written from a critical perspective (for example, Nagata, 2015a and 2015b; and Sato, et al., 2016), and publications in English on this topic are also scant². Given this, one can say that debate has not been sufficient on the point of whether Japanese have been able to build the foundation for a sustainable society through ESD.

It is no exaggeration to say that publications concerning DESD circulating globally accompanied with the logo of the Japanese government’s funds-in-trust leave one with the impression that Japan is a country with advanced ESD in practice (Didham and Ofei-Manu, 2012). It is true that Japan was the country that proposed the DESD to the United Nations, and that Japan has provided funding as a donor nation to support the international movement connected with ESD. However, concerning the question of whether or not ESD has brought about changes in Japanese traditional education system, one cannot easily answer in the affirmative. As I will discuss later, this is likely because Japan has not actually undergone the kind of transformation that was aimed for from the start. “Transformation” here refers to bringing about a change deep enough to affect a values system. The DESD was also a decade during which the Japanese education system itself came to be questioned.

The author has served as a member of the Monitoring and Evaluation Expert Group (MEEG) at the UNESCO headquarters during the DESD, and I have been able to view Japan’s ESD from a position outside the country and from a comparative international perspective. In this article, I will make the most of this international experience as well as a literature review in order to clarify the following points:

First, Japan is one of the few countries in which ESD has been positioned as mainstream policy by the government.

Second, even with this level of governmental backing, the transformations sought after through ESD have not necessarily taken place.

Third, the cause of this is that the dynamism inherent in ESD has been diluted through

fragmentation seen during the implementation process; in other words, by pouring the “new wine” of ESD into the “old bottle” of the traditional Japanese educational system, ESD became stunted.

Fourth, within ESD practice there are both “shallow ESD” and “deep ESD,” and it is essential to be conscious of the latter in order to prevent this loss of dynamism.

Lastly, in order to realize “deep ESD,” one needs to replace typical educational methods with more holistic ones; making use of the holistic approaches, in turn, requires a reform-oriented mindset from administrative agencies down to the actual places where the education is being implemented.

1. Japan’s Mainstreamed ESD Policy

In Japan, ESD enjoys a policy-level foundation extending from governmental educational agencies down to implementation of ESD educational content within the classroom. By the time of the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, which served as the closing conference for the DESD, ESD had reached the point that mainstreaming ESD was one of the five priority action areas of the Global Action Program (GAP), a follow-up programme of the DESD. However, it is fair to say that Japan was actually engaged in mainstreaming ESD from the beginning of the decade.

In order to pursue comprehensive and effective implementation of policy related to the DESD, the Interagency Coordinating Council for the UNDESD was established within the Japanese cabinet, and in 2006 a UNDESD Implementation Plan was made public. The Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, a plan revised every five years that guides education at the national level, incorporated ESD into national educational policy in each of two five-year periods, spanning the DESD as a whole. In addition, the National Course of Study, which exerts a big influence on education at the classroom level and functions as a national curriculum, instruction was required to be given about sustainable society in the subject areas of social studies, science, life environment studies, home economics, moral education, and health and physical education. Based on these activities, we can truly say that Japan is one of the few countries that has positioned ESD in the mainstream of its educational system. However, what is the reality of ESD in the classroom and at the community level? When we think about this point, there is something interesting to report, which I will raise in the next section.

First, however, the reader should be aware of an evaluation of Japan’s ESD that appeared in a report by the United Nations University and Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) (Didham and Ofei-Manu, 2012, 33) .

“Compared to the other countries evaluated, it seems surprising that the country at the leading edge of ESD [translator’s note: Japan] is not using advanced methods and holistic approaches to ESD and is not progressive in the lessons it implements.”

The above quote was taken from the report of an internationally comparative survey, and the “other countries” include six nations: Cambodia, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. Japan is recognized for being the country that proposed the

DESD, and it is viewed internationally as being an “advanced ESD country” with a national network for promoting ESD. However, when experts from abroad visit schools in Japan for their research, it seems that they are not infrequently surprised to find that the lessons are “not progressive” when seen in front of their eyes.

At the majority of schools that promote ESD, it’s not unusual to see lessons related to global warming, the making of “green curtains” (walls with greenery that help to insulate), and the creation of biological gardens called “biotopes”. However, the majority of the educational methods used in these lessons are traditional and could be called “ordinary.” For example, even if the lesson takes up the concept of sustainability, in many cases, it is still taught as a whole group lesson by the teacher just as before, and the perspective is still traditional, as that is what is dominant at school. Next, I would like to look closely at the background cause of this gap.

2. Transformation—The Outstanding Issue

The International Implementation Scheme (hereafter ‘IIS’) documents the principles of ESD, in which the description of the basic vision is “a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.” (UNESCO, 2005, 6) In Japan, however, “sustainable future” is emphasized far greater than “societal transformation”. Therefore, we can attempt an evaluation of ESD in Japan by paying attention to the latter.

“Transformation” is arguably the most important concept concerning ESD, and was emphasized at the conceptualization stage of the DESD. The following was written in the draft International Implementation Scheme for the DESD, one year prior to the start of the DESD: “Transformative education is needed: education that helps bring about the fundamental changes demanded by the challenges of sustainability (...) Education is the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development (...)” In addition, the Education for Sustainable Development Sourcebook published by UNESCO in 2012 clearly states: “ESD, in its broadest sense, is education for social transformation with the goal of creating more sustainable societies.” (UNESCO, 2012)

In Japan’s Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, which is revised every five years, ESD was positioned as an important policy across the entirety of Japan’s education in both the first and second of two periods coinciding with the DESD, with UNESCO Schools³ designated as the basis for this promotion. The plan for the second period states: “Through steps such as enhancing both the quality and quantity of UNESCO Schools, we will promote education that leads to the building of a sustainable society (Education for Sustainable Development: ESD)”. (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013, 53).

What I would like to emphasize here is the “quality” in “both quality and quantity.” One could take the statement to mean that since the number of UNESCO Schools in the country has increased (Figure 1), one now just needs to measure an increase in quality. However, it is important to confirm how we are to measure “quality” in the case of ESD. Concerning this point, the IIS (page 27), states the following: “Quality has become a dynamic concept that has constantly to adapt to a world whose societies are undergoing profound social and economic transformation.” (Quotation from a Ministerial Round Table on Quality

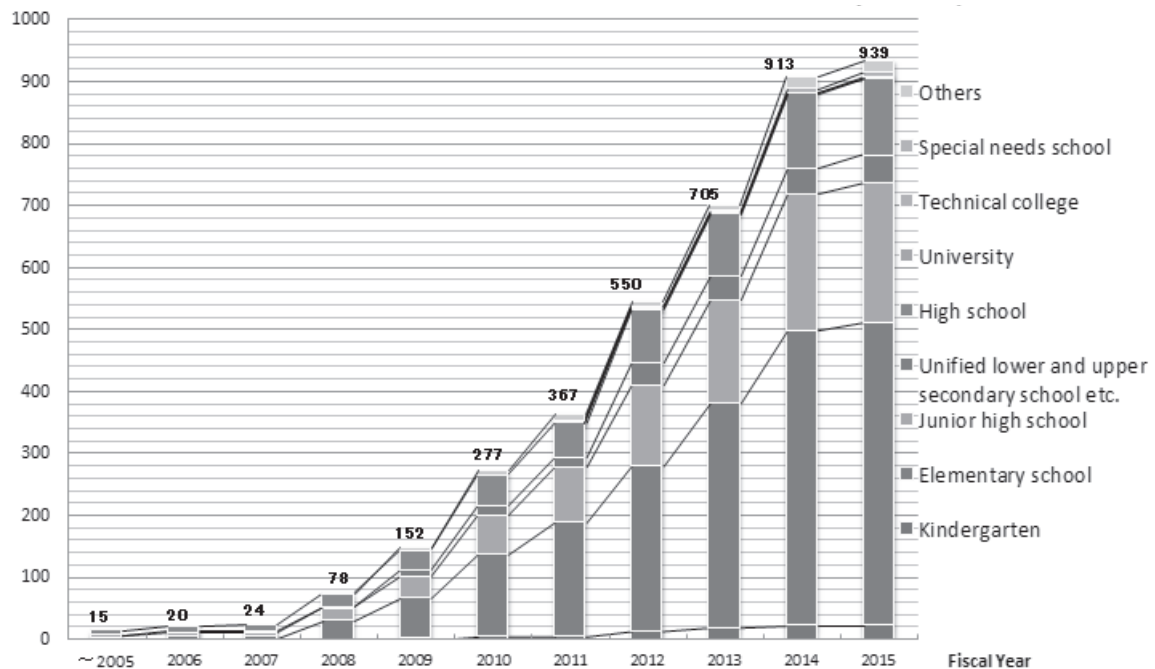


Figure 1 Transition in the number of UNESCO Associated Schools (ASPnet)
 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology / Japan National Commission for UNESCO.
A Guide to Promoting ESD (Education for Sustainable Development). (First Edition). 2015. p. 37.

Education: UNESCO, 2003, 1)

What we need to emphasize here is “profound (...) transformation.” Rather than the obtaining of surface-level knowledge, what’s needed is transformation along the dimension of enabling individuals to develop perspectives and personalities that will help them create a sustainable society. If traditional education is transmissive education, then we should call ESD truly “transformative education.”

The question to be asked now is “Have the UNESCO Schools in Japan, which were anticipated to play a key role in ESD, achieved transformation along this deep dimension through their efforts during the DESD?” The National UNESCO School Convention (called the 6th Japan’s National UNESCO ASPnet Conference) held at the closing juncture of the DESD, provided an opportunity to reflect on UNESCO School activities during the decade. As a result, the Okayama Declaration of the UNESCO Associated Schools in Japan Promoting Education for Sustainable Development beyond the United Nations Decade of ESD was adopted. In this a commitment that we will “illustrate transformation of students, teachers, schools and communities through ESD to spread the ESD vision, while understanding the essence of ESD” was stated (ACCU, 2015, 196).

The declaration was composed of three parts—outcomes, commitment, and proposals. In the second part, remaining issues where results had not been achieved were listed. Thus, regarding the commitment in the declaration to “demonstrate clear transformation,” we noticed that that kind of transformation had not been seen. Why over the course of ten years, was transformation at the core of ESD not happening in Japan? I would like to address the reasons next.

3. Why is Transformation Difficult to Achieve?

UNESCO, the lead agency for the DESD, defined the essential attribute of ESD to be addressing the wellbeing of all three realms of sustainability – environment, society, and economy. At the same time, in order to emphasize the independence of each area in the world, the idea that “No universal models of ESD exist” was stressed (UNESCO, 2005, 30). Thus, from the start of the DESD, there was an expression of the idea that “while there is overall agreement on principles of sustainability and supporting concepts, there will be nuanced differences according to local contexts, priorities, and approaches”(ibid.). As a result, it is left up to each country to define its own sustainability and education priorities and actions.

In Japan, how were sustainability and education priorities and actions communicated? Here I would like to share representative examples of ESD illustrations developed by both governmental agencies and citizens’ organizations. Figure 2 is well-known among those connected with UNESCO Schools in Japan, which were expected to promote ESD. In the illustration, Knowledge, Values and Behaviour are placed at the center as the Basic Way of Thinking for ESD along with Integrated Development of Environment, Economy and Society. This is then overlapped along the perimeter by subject areas like Environmental Studies, Learning for International Understanding, other existing school subjects, as well as global issues.

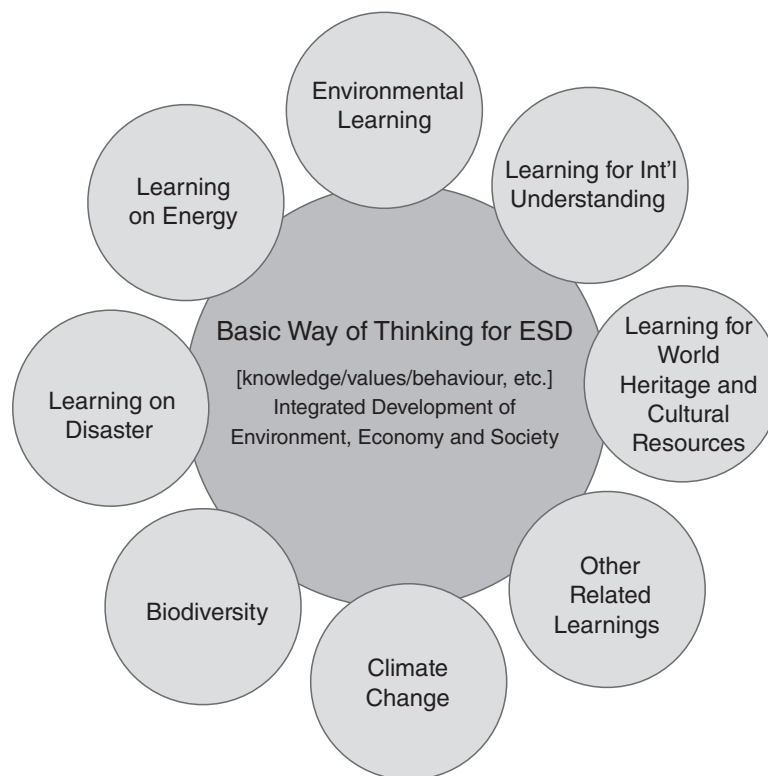


Figure 2 ESD Concept Illustration

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Japanese National Commission for UNESCO) Homepage. Referenced September 8, 2016. (Translated by the author)

Figure 3 is an illustration distributed by ESD-J (Japan Council on Education for Sustainable Development), which has supported grassroots ESD activities in Japan since the beginning of the DESD. At the center of this illustration, the word “[e]ssence” is placed, and surrounding and overlapping that, the new education that came to rise in postwar Japan is positioned.

Similar concept illustrations used by universities championing ESD during the DESD also took this basic shape, and from this one can see that ESD was regarded as the foundation or essence of various school subject areas and types of education. Both of the concept illustrations above in particular were representative illustrations used by governmental agencies and citizens’ groups as important tools for spreading ESD, and we need to discuss how they actually functioned.

Reflecting on the DESD, it has been pointed out that ESD is an inclusive concept that has an extremely wide scope. Because of this, the concept was hard to grasp and it did not spread (Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 2014, 13). Certainly, the centers of Figure 2 or 3 do not indicate a clearly delimited concept. Because of this, easier to understand subject areas and topics at the periphery garnered attention, and people likely interpreted that commitment to these areas would carry the weight of ESD implementation. However, as a result, it can be said that the decade ended without achieving the transformation intended through ESD.

Added to the above, the DESD coincided with a period of globalization, and development of skills demanded by this era, such as communication skills and problem solving skills, was emphasized. It is fair to point out that the influence of the trends of this era also contributed to ESD’s fragmentation.

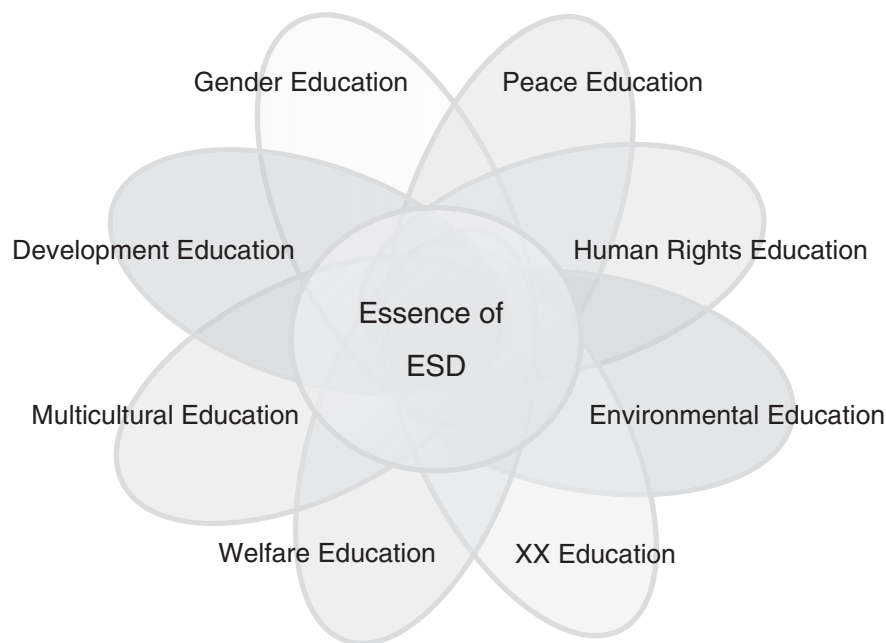


Figure 3 The Essence of ESD and Various Types of Education
ESD-J Homepage. Referenced September 8, 2016. (Translated by the author)

Let us look at a concrete example. The explanation of the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) concerning indicators for implementing ESD instruction in the classroom listed six components of a sustainable society and seven competencies and attitudes to emphasize in learning instruction based on ESD (Figure 4).

Figure 4 had a particularly strong influence on the UNESCO Schools that were expected to implement ESD in Japan. If one closely examines the illustration, it includes concepts, competencies and attitudes, and there were quite a number of schools that followed this illustration in implementing ESD. However, six abstract notions deeply connected to ESD's essence were frequently used at the stage of interpreting the lessons implemented in each school, whereas the seven practical skills and attitudes were emphasized at the conceptualization stage. Thus, there was a tacit understanding that if teachers and administrators touched on at least one of these competencies and attitudes, they would be implementing ESD.

As made clear originally in the draft IIS for the DESD (UNESCO, 2004, 4), ESD is ho-

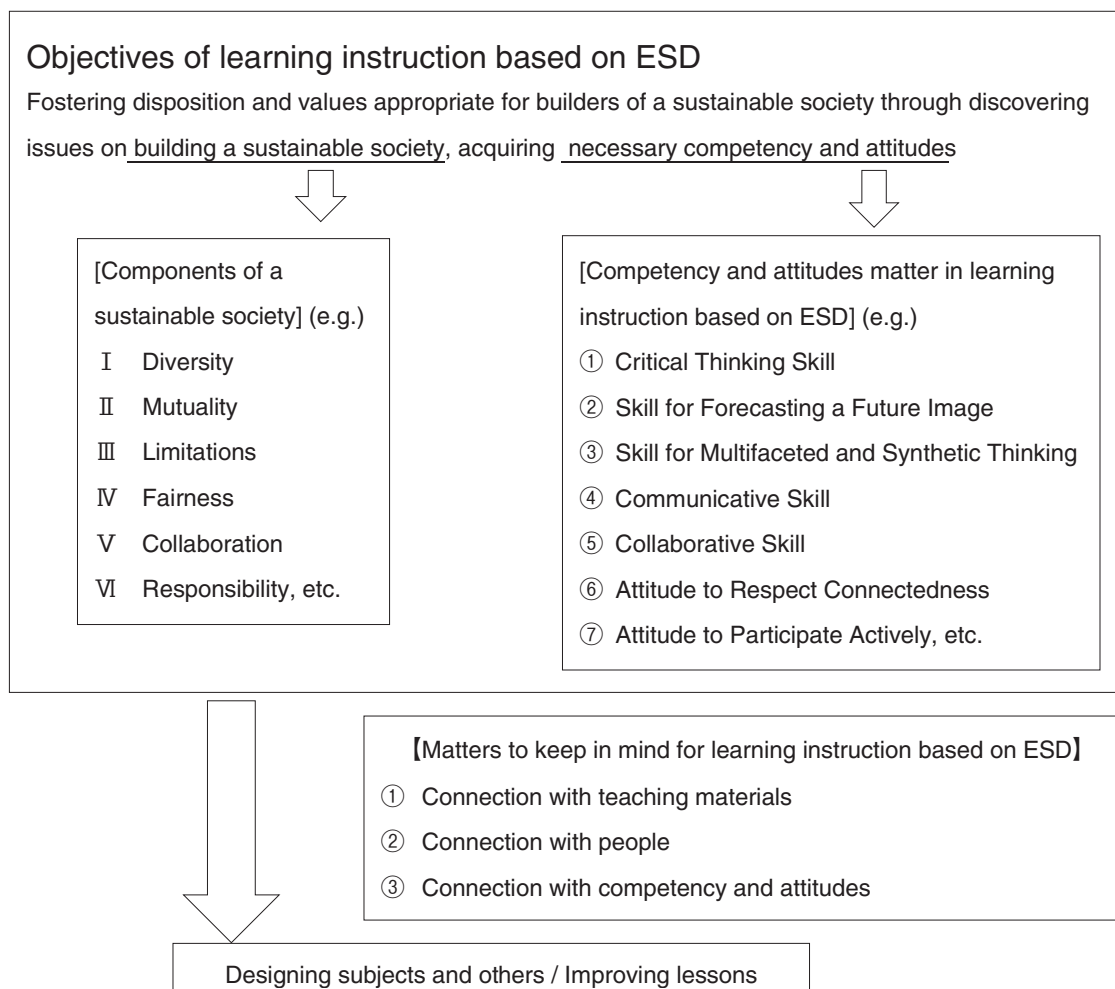


Figure 4 Components of a Sustainable Society and ESD Competencies and Attitudes

Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research. *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the Schools. (Final Report)*, 2012. p. 4. (translated by the author)

listic in its basic character. Because of that, development of the whole person beyond mere skills development as well as institutional transformation are emphasized. In Japan, however, the fact that policies and actions have been established without recognition of this essential point of ESD is an issue that remains outstanding even after the end of the decade.

4. Shallow ESD and Deep ESD

The following illustration distinguishes between “narrow ESD” and “broad ESD”. Figure 5 was printed in a report published by UNESCO in the 2012, at the midpoint of the DESD. According to this illustration, ESD is fundamental learning positioned at the core of six types of education that have developed and spread since the 1970s, including development education, environmental education, human rights education, climate change education, disaster risk reduction education, and consumer education. In the report, examples of “narrow” and “broad” ESD in each of these realms were presented, and the presentation was structured to show that the “broad ESD” efforts were more ESD-like. Examining one example of the “nar-

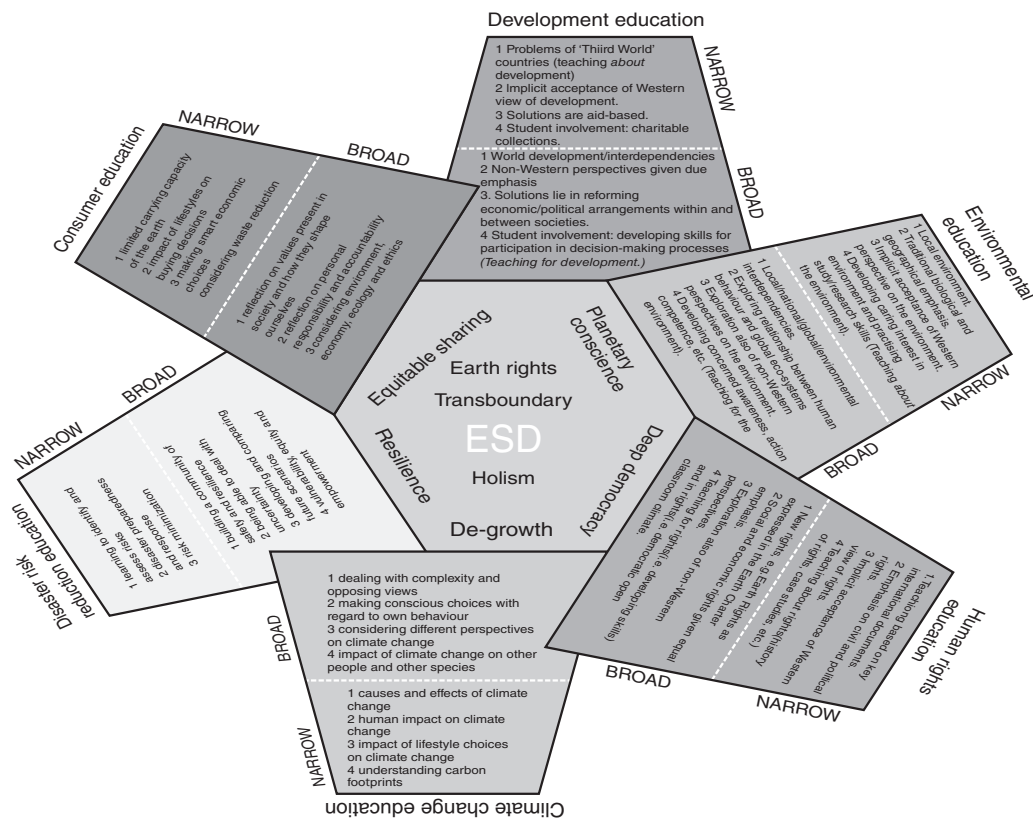


Figure 5 Positioning deep ESD at the intersection of six ESD-related educations Arjen E. J. Wals (2012) *Shaping the Education of Tomorrow: 2012 Full-length Report on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*. UNESCO. p. 71.

row ESD” concerning environmental education, we observe that attributes mentioned consist of “traditional biological and geographical emphasis” and “implicit acceptance of Western perspective on the environment.” With “broad ESD,” the education is described as “exploring relationships between human behaviour and global eco-system” and “exploration of non-Western perspectives on the environment.” As can be seen in the examples, the “broad ESD” is more strongly rooted in fundamental principles such as holism at the center of the illustration.

Within the classroom, the fragmented ESD described earlier became implemented as “narrow ESD”. Thus, ESD, which was intended to have a fundamentally holistic orientation, became partly stunted. It became more limited, having lost its organic nature and dynamism, and one could not see the kind of dynamism that would spur a vibrant institutional transformation. Lessons therefore remains unchanged without departing from the customary type of education in Japan.

I am reframing the terms “narrow ESD” and “broad ESD” into “shallow ESD” and “deep ESD” based on whether or not they are deeply rooted in the fundamental principles indicated in the central part of Figure 5.

The DESD has produced examples of shallow ESD and deep ESD, and this is not limited to ESD implementation within Japan. The problem is that even if one aims for deep ESD at the planning stage, there is a trend towards fragmentation and stunting of ESD when it is integrated into the existing system (shallow ESD). As expressed earlier, ESD is dynamic education because it is aimed at reforming the traditional models of education. Thus, in order to enhance ESD and make the most of its essence, stakeholders need to emphasize processes that will deepen sustainability practices in education, or what we can call deep ESD.

As indicated above, at the conceptualization stage, ESD was intended to transform individual perspectives at the level of culture within institutions and communities. Despite this, we see the tendency for outcomes to only focus on shallow ESD.

Part of the reason for these results can be found in the tendency for fundamental concepts such as ‘holism’ and ‘resilience’ indicated at the center of Figure 5 to have been quickly disregarded. ESD was pulled toward the magnetic field of traditional school-based education and implementation ended up at shallow ESD. Thus, transformation was not achieved.

I have described the traditional magnetic field of Japanese education as involving characteristics such as emphasis on standards and results over process; lessons focused on participation of the full group at once; the explicit difference in rank between managerial staff and teachers; top down rather than bottom up approaches; limited participation from students and teachers in the management of classes and the school; and an excessive emphasis on evaluation (Nagata, 2014).

These are characteristics related to learning, but in terms of governmental educational policies, one also sees an over-emphasis on competitive prizes, consumerist approaches such as appointing TV personalities to communicate ESD to the public, and campaigns aimed at short-term results. These are the characteristics that can be seen as a result of the process of globalization of current society; their influence is shallow and transient. At a minimum, we can surmise that during the DESD forward-looking ESD became caught up in these traditional customs related to the process of globalization. So, how can this conundrum be resolved?

In education as well as other areas, we can find useful the metaphor of putting “new

wine into old bottles”. It is not unusual for flavor to be lost or weakened when putting new wine into an old bottle. As such, to preserve the flavor of the ESD wine, it is essential to try out alternative ideas and practices, as well as uphold policies and processes that support these practices, thereby transforming the bottle itself.

It is possible that we can substitute the word “conventional culture” for the words “old bottle,” and it may be safe to say that schools and communities will first be able to experience the unique characteristics of ESD once they change unsustainable feature stemming from their traditional culture. In order to do that, it is necessary for those implementing ESD to recognize the importance of transformation and to use holistic approaches and tools⁴ that will shift toward learners taking endogenous actions, as well as to have a policy environment that facilitates this. Taken together with the policy support mentioned at the beginning of this article, some tools can be applied at the level of practice, thereby opening up the possibility of cultivating important values for a sustainable society.⁵

The whole institutional approach emphasized by UNESCO from the start of the DESD was characteristic of the majority of schools and communities that were able to demonstrate transformation along a deep dimension. Moreover, we can learn methods of implementing education that transform the traditional culture endogenously from laureates that have won the UNESCO/Japan ESD Award, as well as other innovative schools or communities.⁶

Nevertheless, designing mechanisms to provide ongoing support for these kinds of good practices remains an issue. It is true that there was an innovative national framework for sustainable schools during the Blair administration in the U.K. However, we also face the urgent challenge of avoiding bureaucratic management that is too focused on numerical indicators and need to create a support system that will help and stimulate people and communities to pursue their own growth from within.⁷

From the practices of these schools and communities evaluated as having the best ESD – and with system-level transformation aligned with the spirit of these good practices – we can find a logical path to develop our own “new bottles” that make it possible to experience ESD’s full flavor.

Notes

- 1 Speech by the Prime Minister of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/environment/wssd/2002/kinitiative2.html>. Referenced July 8, 2016.
- 2 One of the rare works published in English is Singer, et al. (2017).
- 3 In English, it usually refers to ‘UNESCO Associated Schools’ or ‘UNESCO ASPnet (Associated Schools Project Network) Schools.’ In this paper, following Japanese custom, ‘UNESCO Schools’ is being used.
- 4 The author and others have proposed four approaches for bringing about transformation at the individual and institutional levels. These are the individual level values transformation approach, the curriculum level infusion approach, the institutional level whole school approach, and the community level problem solving approach (for details, refer to Nagata 2012).
- 5 As an example of a method that might be effective, one could use a process like a rubric to recognize customary ways of doing things and develop and share a self-monitoring and evaluation tool to help with correction of these issues. For example, see *ESD Lens* (UNESCO, 2010).
- 6 For the winners of the UNESCO/Japan ESD Award, refer to the following URL: <https://en.unesco.org/prize-esd>. For “innovative schools and communities,” for example, see whole school/com-

munity approaches of Ashley Primary School in UK (URL: <http://www.ashleyschool.org.uk>) and Nagatadai Elementary School in Japan (for an English paper written by the principal, see Sumita Masaharu. 'Transformation in the Awareness of Teachers, Schools and Communities' (ACCU 2015, 143-149).

- 7 For the national framework for sustainable schools under the Blair administration, see <http://seed.co.uk/edu/sustainable-schools-frameworks/>

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