

Education for Sustainable Development in China

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Abstract: In order to inform humans of the knowledge of the environment and the relationship between humans and nature, it is necessary to introduce sustainability related knowledge to students and educators via education, as the first step toward global sustainability (Wheeler & Bijur, 2000). Education is a way, by which people may find whether their practices are sustainable or not, to inform the knowledge of sustainable practices. Education for sustainable development has been widely developed worldwide, but no research has been done to summarize education development associated with sustainability in China, which is the purpose of this article.

Keywords: Education for sustainable development (ESD), China, Challenges, Environmental education (EE)

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Agenda 21 was declared to stress the importance of integrating education for sustainable development (ESD) into all disciplines, whose overall intent was to address the necessity of sustainability for both the environment and society (Mckeown & Hopkins, 2003; Wheeler & Bijur, 2000). Meanwhile, education for sustainability (EfS) demands integrating economics and equality with environmental concerns and recognizes that “human rights and social justice are just as essential to sustainable development as environmental sustainability” (Gough, 2005, p. 342), which meeting the requirements of Agenda 21 (Mckeown & Hopkins, 2003; Wheeler & Bijur, 2000). EfS focuses on developing both locally and culturally appropriate programs, which increases the likelihood of successful ESD programs while decreasing the risk of introducing inappropriate programs (Mckeown & Hopkins, 2003).

There are great challenges for Chinese educators today. First, a huge population forces primary and middle schools to enroll far more students in a class than their counterparts in Europe and America. The class size in China averages 40 to 50 students (Jin, 2011; Liu et al., 2011). Second, severe competition for college and school admission results in education oriented toward high scores on exams, which leads both the government and society to regard enrolment rate in the current schools as the benchmark of evaluating school effectiveness. Chinese government and educators have been dedicated to overcoming the existing problems to develop sustainably. They have attempted to make changes toward quality education rather than exam-based education. In 2001, the national curriculum reform raised public awareness that education shouldn't be focused exclusively on mastery of content knowledge and exam competition (Yi & Wu, 2009). China's education is confronting big challenges, but China, as a large developing country, has a role to play in serving people's needs today and creating a better future for their offspring. Thus, educational leaders in China need to seriously consider the relationship between sustainability and education.

For many decades, China was slow to recognize its environmental problems. According to research by Tian (2008) on China's ESD policy, it was Premier Zhou who first advocated environmental protection and environmental education (EE) and asked the State Council to pay more attention to pollution in 1969. The research showed that ESD experienced three phases in China. Chinese people, especially the national leaders, recognized the importance of the environment for the first time after the Stockholm Conference, which directly led to the First National Meeting on Environmental Protection in Beijing in 1973. The second phase from 1983 to 1992 was a period in which EE in China was forming and developing. The Second National Meeting on Environmental Protection held in 1983 resulted in the government's recognition of strengthening EE for officials and average citizens. Following this, EE activities in China changed, and the contents of EE became more explicitly defined. At the same time, EE began spreading to the whole of society. The third phase began in 1992, concurrent with the UN Conference of Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The First National Meeting for EE in China was jointly held by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). The importance of EE was enhanced in schools. This indicated that EE had come into a new period. The National Action Guideline for Environmental Propaganda and Education in 1996 symbolized EE as not only a political task but also a part of academic research (Tian, 2008). According to a review of Chinese literature from 1979 to 2005, the number of papers on ESD increased while that of EE decreased in 2004 and 2005 (Tian,

2008). This suggests the possibility that ESD is becoming more popular and replacing EE in China.

There are still problems existing in ESD in China today. First, ESD has been adopted to develop environmental consciousness in different regions or cities in China. For example, Beijing and Shanghai were well-prepared for the Olympic Games (2008) and the World Expo (2010), which improves public awareness of environmental protection. However, those in the countryside still lag behind because they do not have sufficient knowledge of EE or ESD. Second, EE and ESD have been emphasized in middle and upper classes for students of primary and middle schools, but they are not emphasized enough for workers in industry or agriculture. Third, environmental consciousness is still low among Chinese people because of limited knowledge, technology, and management. Fourth, EE has not yet acquired systemic insurance as a main feature in schooling, such as funding, technology, and management (Tian, 2008; Yi & Wu, 2009). Therefore, a lot of work must be done to make full use of ESD, which may promote public awareness of environmental protection and educate Chinese people to behave more friendly to the environment.

Over the last decade, ESD has been widely implemented “under the leadership of the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO with extensive participation of local schools” (Zhang, 2010, p. 11). Du Yue, Deputy Secretary General of the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, mentioned that during the period of the UN DESD, China had accomplished three major shifts: from an international concept of ESD to a Chinese concept, from intervention and action research to public policy-making, and from school-based innovation to school-community partnership-building (Du, 2008). ESD now “has become a unique education innovation with increasing recognition” in China (Zhang, 2010, p. 11).

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