



PROMOTING ACTION COMPETENCE THROUGH INTEGRATED LEARNING IN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Johanna Diwa Acallar

United Nations University
Institute for Sustainability and Peace
Japan

Introduction

In time of serious global-scale environmental degradations and destructions, strong attention has been called to protect the environment and intensify environmental education. Environmental problems had led to slogans such as environment conservation and more recently, sustainable development. Sustainable development is a term popularized in the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) published by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 1980. With the publication of “Our Common Future”, the Brundtland Report in 1987, the term sustainable development has achieved greater attention and status. In 1992, heads of various states during the United Nation Conference on Environment and Development, agreed on the importance of reorienting education to achieve sustainable development. They claimed that the early concept of Environmental Education is no longer apt to address the complex challenges of sustainable development and demands of the 21st century.

This paper explores the relationship between action competence approach and initiatives in education for sustainable development in environmental programs held in integrated period in the Philippines. First, the evolution of environmental education was linked to ESD, as a predecessor that could inform the design and implementation of learning programs for sustainability. Next, it was explained how the framework of action competence can serve as an educational ideal that promotes the vital elements needed in reorienting education towards sustainability. Third, the nature of environmental learning was analyzed through ESD initiatives as integrated in the environmental programs in schools. Finally, the conclusion provides some implications in the future development of action competence in environmental education as a contributor to the success of ESD initiatives towards creating a sustainable society in the Philippines.

From Environmental Education (EE) to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

A historical analysis of the evolution of environmental education reveals that from its initial simplistic nature and goals, environmental education has undergone more coherent conceptual and methodological development. In the definition of environmental education by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources the nature of the concept is seen to entail a simplistic goal and scope, one that promotes understanding and appreciation, and is void of action.



This definition was improved in 1977 during the UNESCO-UNEP sponsored Tbilisi conference and the goals, objectives, guiding principles and models of implementation of environmental education were reviewed and developed to be more coherent and context-oriented. The improved definition transformed the simplistic presentation of the concept to a more active nature where action is present and vital in solving environmental problems. The issues of conflict between environmental conservation and development was addressed for the first time in The World Conservation Strategy Report (IUCN, UNEP and WWF, 1980) where development and conservation were said to be mutually dependent of each other, establishing the very concept of ‘sustainable development’ for the first time.

A new phase of environmental education arose with the publication of Our Common Future in 1987 or better known as the Brundtland Report, where the role of environmental education was defined to be vital in promoting sustainable development. In 1992, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro adopted Agenda 21, a global plan for sustainable development where a comprehensive set of principles were provided to assist the implementation of policies and programmes of governments and institutions.

According to UNESCO (2005) a key challenge in the decade is moving environmental education to ESD. In a situational analysis of the issues and situation in line with ESD in the Asia-Pacific region, it was discovered that ESD is still predominantly conceptualized in the context of environmental education by many key stakeholders and decision makers. Thus, there is so much to learn from the experience of successful environmental education programs to inform the future success of the design and implementation of ESD initiatives.

Promoting Students’ Action Competence on Environmental Issues

The importance of action competence in environmental education has been emphasized by several researchers, particularly in Denmark where it has been a key concept in educational research since the 1980s (e.g. Fien 1993, Breiting et.al. 1994). Breiting and Mogensen (1999) argued that in further improving environmental education, the conceptions related to ‘environmental issues’ should be understood as issues arising from conflicts of interests at varying levels in the community. Further, they maintained that the new generation of environmental education should aim for the development of the action competence of students. According to Soren and Breiting (1999) action competence aims to develop a critical, reflective and participative attitude so that a developing adult can cope with future and complex environmental problems. The praxis of environmental education have changed perspective and the more complex nature of environmental problems we are facing nowadays necessitates an environmental education that commit students to action rather than simply providing them insights and prescribing behavior toward an environmental issue. The revision of national curriculum in many countries which move beyond the traditional behavioral modification



approach and promote a more coherent action competence concept in environmental education is an important step in reorienting education toward sustainability.

Action competence is basically different from the behavior modification approach whose goal is to improve and save the environment. The fundamental philosophical distinction between action competence and behavioral modification approaches is that the directions in the latter are given in advance and the evaluation of its success is whether students adopt a prescribed behavior in a particular scenario. However, in the tradition of democratic education, the behavioral modification concept does not encompass vital elements such as participation, dialogue and co-influence which are crucial in a successful environmental education programs. (Breiting, et. al., 1999)

From traditional environmental education, ESD proposes a new way and more effective framework in implementing environmental education. This framework promotes the elements of action competence theory. According to Jensen (2000), action competence involves the development of the ability of students to act not only in a personal level but at the societal level. To have action competence is more than just being aware of or having an attitude towards environmental problems. In the tradition of democratic education, action competence help students to develop skills in identifying personal and structural factors behind the problems and identifying their own possibilities to influence or create changes from these conditions to alleviate the problem.

Jensen, et.al (2000) revealed that action competence environmental education attempts to break free from the typical characteristic of the traditional approach of moralising behaviour modification. Pupils need skills such as: knowledge/insight, commitment, visions, action experiences as well as more general skills such as co-operative skills, communication skills, planning skills and so on underpinned by a critical perspective (Jensen, 2000). Other related literature on action competence emphasize that knowledge in the action competence framework is formed from a range of perspectives, to inform choices and decisions for taking action (Breiting and Mogensen 1999 and Uzzell 1999).

Uzzell (1999) made a critical analysis of environmental education as it is presently taught and practiced and discovered that environmental education does not lead to action competence; employs a top-down and centre to periphery learning models where children are seen as passive receivers; lacks authenticity; questionable record of changing attitudes and values of children; and, the social, cultural and political context facilitates little participation and change.



Characteristics of ESD Learning in Environmental Programs

An analysis on the environmental programs of outstanding schools in the rural and urban areas in the Philippines was conducted based on school materials containing the environmental activities of each school. It generated five major characteristics of ESD initiatives in schools; 1) curriculum integration, 2) policy formulation, 3) effective implementation, 4) training and 5) self-empowerment. Through this analysis, this study aims to examine how these characteristics help promote student action competence in dealing with environmental issues.

Curriculum Integration

Environmental concepts are integrated in subjects and school activities. For example, themes such as 'Strengthening Partnership for Environment and Indigenous People' are integrated in the classes in a school located in the southern Philippines. Art contests focus on ecotourism as a running theme. Gardening in home economics led to the most important environmental achievement of the school, running a greening program in a one-hectare 30-year old tree plantation within the school campus with different species that established a tree nursery with a large number of seedlings planted in the river embankments. Integrating ESD in the curriculum resulted to a well-balanced blend of conceptual and experiential knowledge. It reflects the knowledge and action elements of action competence as it promotes learning beyond knowledge level to take the children's learning into action level.

Policy Formulation

The democratic tradition in decision making and collective participation as elements of action competence are clearly manifested in the policy formulation component of the schools' environmental programs. In compliance to the implementing rules and regulations of R.A. No 9003 (Solid Waste Management Act of the Philippines), a school located in the urban area expressed compliance through collaborative action and responsibility in the solid waste management policies of the school and the local government. In formulating policies and making decisions involving the school and the environment, officials both from school, community and local government discuss the different concerns of the school and identified the policies that need to be implemented. Also worth noting is a Resolution passed by the Supreme Student Government regarding Anti-Smoking Policy of one rural school. This resolution was formulated, enacted and implemented by the students themselves.

Effective Implementation

An effective implementation of environmental programs is found in schools as involving various stakeholders such as parents, community, local government, NGOs, etc. The local government officials are involved in a once-a-month meeting with school officials to identify how the school can help in the initiatives of the government for environmental protection. They also reach out to the community by providing a value orientation seminar to residents in partnership with local officials who meet every



month. There are also active partnerships among schools, local government and international agencies in projects such as forming and strengthening eco-organizations, and establishing a tree plantation in the waste processing facility and in rehabilitating a portion of the nearby river.

Institutional Training

Training through seminars and workshops to the faculty and students is another component of the environmental programs in the schools. Students are taught to act on their own capacity to be an agent of change by influencing others. As a result, they possess the skills needed in addressing environmental issues, which could boost their confidence in dealing with environmental issues.

Self-Empowerment

Perhaps the most important component of the environmental programs in schools is self-empowerment. Environmental projects raised fund that the schools can use in supporting and operating their projects by themselves. This is an example where crisis are turned into opportunities and wastes are transformed to money while learning and acting for the environment. This clearly manifests another action competence element of empowerment not only in the individual level but in the institutional level as well.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to understand how environmental programs in integrated studies in the Philippines promote action competence that could inform the design and implementation of ESD initiatives in the Philippines. By examining the environmental programs in outstanding schools, it was clear that several elements of action competence are present in reorienting education toward sustainability.

A holistic integration of environmental concepts in the curriculum provides students balance between conceptual and experiential aspects of learning for sustainability. The democratic tradition of education is also important especially in decision making where policies are formulated based on a consultative and participative manner. The involvement of the stakeholders is also crucial in effective implementation of environmental programs. Partnerships between schools and the community, local government, NGOs and parents contribute to the sustainability of the programs thus they should be consulted and involved from the formulation to the implementation stage. Institutional training and workshops build the capacity of students, faculty and staff to be agents of change themselves. Finally, environmental programs generate creative solutions and alternatives that give way to innovation and empowerment not only in an individual level but in an institutional level as well. Empowered individuals or institutions acquire the ability to provide for their own need and as a result could boost their confidence in dealing and addressing environmental issues. These successful



environmental programs offer a rich experience that could inform the design and implementation of ESD initiatives towards creating a sustainable society in the Philippines.

References:

- Breiting, S. Heidegaard, K. Mogensen, F. Nielsen, K. and Shcnack, K. 1999. *Handlekompetence, interessekonflikter og Miljøundervisning—MUVIN—projektet* (Environmental Education and Action Competence—The MUVIN-DK Project) (Odense, Odense University Press).
- Breiting, S., Mogensen, F. 1999. *Action Competence and Environmental Education*. Cambridge Journal of Education, Vol. 29, No. 3.
- Jensen, B.B. and Schnack, K. 1994. Action competence as an educational challenge, in: Jensen, B.B. and Schnack, K. (Eds) *Action and Action Competence as Key Concepts in Critical Pedagogy* (Copenhagen, The Royal Danish School of Educational Studies).
- Jensen, B.B., et.al. 2000. *Critical Environmental and Health Education*. Research Issues and Challenges; Publication no. 46 from the Research Centre for Environmental and Health Education, The Danish University of Education.
- Fien, J., 1993. *Education for the Environment critical curriculum theorising and environmental education* (Geelong, Deakin University Press)
- Fien, J. 1999. Promoting Education for Sustainable Future: Approaches to Regional Co-operation in Asia and the Pacific, In IGES. 1999. *International Conference on Environmental Education in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Proceedings, 27-28th Feb 1999, Yokohama, Japan, IGES and Environment Agency, Government of Japan.
- IUCN. 1970. *Environmental Education Workshop*. Nevada, USA.
- IUCN, UNEP and WWP. 1980. *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*. IUCN, UNEP and WWF, Gland, Switzerland.
- The Brudtland Report; World COMmission on Enviroment and Development, 1988. *Our Common Future*.
- United Nations. 1972. *The United Nations Conference on Human Environment, Declaration on Human Environment*, United Nations, New York, USA.



- UNESCO-UNEP. 1978. *Inter-governmental Conference on Environmental Education*, 14-26 October 1977, Tbilisi, USSR. UNESCO-UNEP, Paris, France
- UNESCO. 2005. *A Situation Analysis of Education for Sustainable Development in the Asia-Pacific Region*, UNESCO, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Uzzell, D. 1999. *Education for Environmental Action in the Community; new roles and relationship*. Cambridge Journal of Education, 29;3, 397-413.