



## ADVANCING FUTURES

Education for Sustainable  
Development and Citizenship

# Educating for Sustainable Development in Today's Classrooms

By Marcela Villán



As the planet confronts escalating ecological crises, from climate change and resource depletion to biodiversity loss and social inequalities, the conventional paradigms of education find themselves at a crossroads. Education is not just a means to personal and professional advancement; it is, fundamentally, a compass guiding our collective journey towards a more equitable and harmonious world. At the heart of this global imperative lies Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), a visionary approach that seeks to empower individuals with the knowledge, skills and mindset necessary to navigate the intricate web of sustainability challenges that define our era. ESD is not just an academic subject. ESD is the means to, and a force capable of, instilling a sense of stewardship, fostering innovation and forging a path towards a world where environmental, social and economic sustainability are no longer mere ideals but a lived reality.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Sustainable Development refers to 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'<sup>1</sup>. Education plays a crucial role in achieving this goal by fostering knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that promote sustainable practices and address global challenges. The UN Sustainable Development Goals require cooperation and collaboration among countries and cultures. Therefore, an education that promotes global citizenship, fosters understanding, empathy and a sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of the entire planet is needed.

This topic is not a modern issue. The United Nations already aimed at integrating sustainable principles and practices in education in its Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) and continued striving to scale it up through the Global Action Programme in 2014. Nevertheless, it is in these present days that it emerges as a common subject in numerous ways.



<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (1987)



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ESD is considered an umbrella term that encompasses three spheres: the economic, the environmental and the social one. Each of them is uniquely important. However, the three of them are intrinsically intertwined if we want to achieve the United Nations Agenda by the year 2030 and, what is more, let us not forget there is a goal that explicitly demands ESD in the classrooms for this to be achieved. Goal Number 4, in its target 4.7, urges all educators to take action by stating that by the year 2030 there is an obligation to 'ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development'<sup>2</sup>. ESD is to be understood as an integral part of Quality Education. No doubt then that all educational institutions, no matter the level, are responsible for including ESD into their curricula somehow.

The most important sphere of ESD educators must work on is, in my opinion, Environmental Education. As mentioned before, the three spheres are interconnected; however, working on the economic sphere first may lead to irresponsible overconsumption and that would affect our environment to a greater degree. So, the consequences of working on the economic side alone may not be the desirable ones for the planet. On the other side, working on the social aspect alone is not enough, as human beings depend on the environment for most of their daily actions. The environment provides people with opportunities to acquire skills, improve their livelihoods and escape the cycle of poverty. Sustainable development aims to reduce poverty in a manner that preserves the environment and promotes social equity. Therefore, Environmental Education should be the kick-off of this sustainable development education that our world so much needs.

Surprising as it may seem, teachers' role is essential to find the solutions to all these serious topics. By imparting Education for Sustainable Development in the classrooms, they will be promoting environmental awareness from very early stages and they will be encouraging and mobilizing individuals and communities to take actions that will lead to a more sustainable future.

By including ESD in the classroom, teachers equip students with the necessary tools to become environmentally literate and active participants in creating their own future. What is more, teachers empower them to make informed decisions, take responsible actions and become

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2 United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)



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advocates for environmental conservation and sustainability. Other important benefits of ESD in the classrooms are the promotion of the concept of sustainable development, the opportunities it provides for interdisciplinary projects and the nurturing of Global Citizenship by connecting with local, national and global perspectives of a same issue.

Now, how can all this fit in a mere language lesson in today's classrooms? First of all, by remembering that teachers do not only teach a language, they teach HUMAN BEINGS, and these human beings need to be aware of the realities that surround them. The educators of today must open their students' eyes to what lies ahead, not in a gloomy way but in a motivating, encouraging manner so that students feel positive towards the future and feel themselves part of the solutions. Here are some ways in which this can be done:

1. Including in the language lessons of readers that deal with social or environmental issues. Parker's *A Long Walk to Water* is an excellent example, dealing with the story of an African girl walking long distances every morning in search of water.
2. Organizing field trips that make students get in contact with nature and motivate them to take action to protect it.
3. Using infographics on environmental, social or economic topics that show solutions to worldwide problems.
4. Writing biographies of people connected with the Sustainable Development Goals, such as Greta Thunberg or Jane Goodall for Goal 13 or Malala for Goal 4.
5. Organizing talks with experts in the area, either virtual or face to face.
6. Watching films like *The Lorax*, which motivate students to act positively.
7. Watching documentaries like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which will open students' eyes to serious environmental issues.
8. Promoting sustainable practices like recycling or composting.
9. Using a project-based learning methodology through which students clearly connect the social, economic and environmental perspectives of an issue.
10. Doing telecollaborative projects, which involve classrooms working together across geographical and cultural boundaries using digital communication technologies.



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Telecollaborative projects offer an inclusive, enriching and transformative learning experience that equips students with the skills and mindset needed to thrive in our interconnected world. They enable individuals to become responsible global citizens, fostering a sense of solidarity and cooperation across borders.

Although the possibilities to take ESD to the classrooms seem endless, there is one big drawback that must be taken into consideration: educators in general do not have background knowledge on the subject due to the fact that this is not taught in any teacher training college at present. As a consequence, teachers need to educate themselves. It is mandatory for them to do so. There are several ways in which they can do it, either by watching videos or reading about the topics on their own or attending experts' talks, webinars or classes. It is common knowledge that an educator must be a constant learner in order to become acquainted with the new trends and pedagogies education needs.

To conclude, one main idea must be kept in mind: Every small step counts. Small actions multiplied by a lot of people will make the big difference that the world needs. Educators play a crucial role to accomplish this by having the possibility of providing people with a new set of values towards nature, of making students active participants in creating a more sustainable and environmentally conscious society, and by creating a new generation of real agents of change.



### Author's biodata

**Marcela Alejandra Villán** qualified as a Teacher of English in Argentina in 1996. She then got a TESOL certification and, at the moment, holds several diplomas and a Bachelor's degree in English Language as well. She has worked extensively in the field as teacher, coordinator, examiner for several British Universities, head of studies, teacher trainer and international speaker.

Marcela specializes in Environmental Education and Global Competence. She supports the United Nations 2030 Agenda as a framework for teaching in the classrooms, as she has been a TeachSDGs ambassador and a UN Global Schools advocate and mentor for some years already. She is also a local coach for the Institute of Humane Education and advocates for the betterment of education as a whole working alongside numerous NGOs with the same aim.