Implementing ESD in a Neoliberal Environment: Contradictions Encountered in Transition

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Across Europe and globally, education is influenced by – and advances – Neoliberalism (Ball & Olmedo 2013). The power of international competition is symptomatic of this; witness the fetishistic adherence to the PISA process, which in turn reinforces atomised curricula that focus on 'core subjects'. This is at odds with a trans-disciplinary conception of sustainable development and is indicative of a deeper mismatch of values.

The author's long-standing involvement in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) process of developing a regional strategy for education for sustainable development (ESD) (UNECE 2005), indicators for the strategy (UNECE 2009) and competences for ESD Educators (UNECE 2012), is behind the motivation to conduct this research. The aim is to explore the inherent contradictions that may arise within schools that seek transition towards deeper engagement in ESD within an overarching economic climate of Neoliberalism. The research also attempts to understand how such contradictions are navigated by schools and their staff.

Earlier studies in this area have tended to focus either on the theory-practice 'gap' (Stephenson 1987; 2007) or the personal perspectives of teachers (Barrett 2007; Cotton 2006). This paper reports on research based on Cultural-historical Activity Theory ('Activity Theory') that examines activity *within* and *across* schools (Engeström 1987) (see methodology section). Activity Theory resonates with ESD; it takes a systemic view exploring simultaneously the elements of an activity system (e.g. a school), the interaction between elements and their relationship with the people in the system (Edwards *et al*. 2009). There are however few examples of Activity Theory being applied in ESD research to date.

This enquiry also investigates *inter alia* the extent to which sample schools embrace both an ESD 1 and ESD 2 perspective (Vare & Scott 2007), i.e. promoting 'positive' behaviours and building capacity for critical thinking.

Data analysis reveals a hierarchy of contradictions and dilemmas encountered in schools that seek to become more sustainable. Surprisingly, interviewees fail to recognise contradictions, even when asked directly about this. At least five explanations are given for this oversight (see Findings), including 'expansive learning'. Engeström 's (1999) concept of expansive learning, i.e. overcoming contradictions by expanding the object of the system, is a process that might be described as *ESD 3*: an emergent quality. This is a concept that requires further development.

Deeper analysis of the data leads to the proposal of four positions that schools appear to adopt *vis-à-vis*sustainability. Importantly, these positions do not necessarily suggest *progression*, rather they are approaches adopted by schools.

Discussion leads to an empowering vision of schools – and society – as autopoietic systems, i.e. as both products and producers, suggesting that social reality is not as inevitable as it seems. By confronting contradictions, educators demonstrate the adaptive capacity required by young people if they are to engage in remodelling their world.

Activity Theory helps explain the inter-related nature of ESD 1 and 2, while ESD 1, 2 *and 3* can render Activity Theory intelligible to a wider research community.

Method

The research is based on Cultural-historical Activity Theory. This takes a deeply contextual approach to understanding specific local practices, the object of those practices, the tools or mediating artefacts being used and the nature of social organisation (Engeström 1999). As well as adopting a systemic view, Activity Theory does not deny the presence of the researcher rather it is interventionist, working through new forms of activity with the subjects. This renders the approach cumbersome and may explain the poor take-up of the theory within environmental education/ESD research. That said, a ‘light-touch’ approach is taken in this study because circumstances prevented the adoption of a deeply immersive research position. Activity Theory explicitly aims to reveal contradictions within, across and between activity systems (Engeström 1997); these may be: - Primary: within an element of the activity system - Secondary: between different system components - Tertiary: between the object of the system and a more culturally more advanced form of activity - Quarternary: between an activity system and neighbouring activities An inductive path is followed in this study allowing for emergent outcomes. Semi-structured interviews with a sample of fifteen teachers and school leaders in twelve schools (primary and secondary) in England are analysed. A form of ‘dilemma analysis’ (Winter 1982) is used to verify data by allowing interviewees to respond to the outcomes of data analysis. In this way the research offers a resource-efficient qualitative interview process that can bring Activity Theory to school-based research with minimum disruption and outlines a streamlined process of dilemma analysis.

Expected Outcomes

Several contradictions emerge from the data. These can be characterised as being at different systemic levels (see Methodology) and also having different levels of intractability. Surprisingly, interviewees fail to recognise contradictions themselves. The data suggests five explanations for this oversight: Unawareness: Not ‘pre-awareness’ because this is a position that individuals may be comfortable to adopt Powerlessness: Occurs where individuals’ objectives are more ambitious or advanced than those of colleagues or leaders Accommodation 1 – Denial: Teachers avoid ‘cognitive dissonance’ by focusing on smaller issues while trusting that the contradiction will be addressed in future Accommodation 2 – ‘Satisficing’ (Cuban 1992): Contradictions are acknowledged but teachers dance among competing possibilities, finding compromises based on professional judgements about what should be sacrificed in order to preserve that which is important Expansive learning: Where contradictions are ‘worked through’ by expanding the system, possibly changing the object of the system, to overcome the contradiction. In relation to ESD 1 and 2 (Vare & Scott 2007), this might be termed ESD 3. The notion of alternative positions of sustainable schools emerges from the analysis. This was unexpected given that

sample schools were selected for their apparent homogeneity in terms of their ‘ESD journey’. A range of approaches emerges leading to a typology of ‘positions’ that schools appear to adopt, i.e.: 1. Discreet: Schools run ‘green’ projects, not linked to curriculum; often voluntary 2. Dutiful: Following a framework e.g. Eco-Schools with minimal curriculum impact 3. Dynamic: Leadership recognises ESD objectives as legitimate outcomes for students 4. Diffuse: Learning organisations confronting contradictions by integrating ESD into everything the school does. These positions do not necessarily suggest progression. While there is an incremental change in some aspects, this is not a continuum. Schools may settle upon qualitatively different forms of activity in response to the contradictions they face.

References

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