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A Rounder Sense of Purpose:
Framing essential competences in education for sustainable development

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We are frequently reminded that environmental and social challenges threaten our wellbeing if not the habitability of the Earth. In an effort to address these concerns the United Nations has defined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO 2017), which it hopes will be achieved globally. The challenge is to make this effort relevant and achievable locally. This is no small task. For simply by choosing to do our jobs well, without reference to the bigger picture, our commonplace actions contribute cumulatively to our unsustainable condition. Where educators do choose to be part of the solution, they find that defining what that means is not straightforward.

This paper references a decade of initiatives to develop educator competences for sustainability (Sleurs 2008; UNECE 2012; Weik *et al*. 2011) and presents the outcomes emerging from an EU-funded project, 'A Rounder Sense of Purpose' (RSP). This project has been developing an accredited framework of competences in education for sustainable development (ESD) that has been piloted extensively in six countries.

Divided into three clusters (*thinking holistically*; *envisioning change*; *achieving transformation*), the RSP competences tackle a range of issues familiar to anyone attempting to lead a process of institutional change. The first competence, *systems thinking*, highlights the nature of intractable or 'wicked' problems that arise within complex adaptive systems and the need to develop what Jacobs (undated) terms 'cognitive complexity'. Other competences in the framework highlight such essential leadership skills as promoting participation, engendering commitment, balancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, working across disciplines, critiquing evidence and fostering productive, inclusive relationships.

Currently the RSP team are conducting research into the assessment of learners (trainee teachers). Preliminary results suggest a powerful impact on the breadth of issues that these students are considering in relation to their practice as well as the level of critique to which they subject their concerns.

While the UN Sustainable Development Goals offer us content and context, they do not in themselves facilitate critical education for sustainable development and global citizenship. Indeed the Goals can read like a top down 'to do' list. The RSP framework represents an effort to balance the tendency to promote preferred 'green' behaviours with the capacity to think critically about and beyond sustainable development concepts and, crucially, to develop the competence to build this capacity in others. The extent to which this represents a pedagogy for transformation is a point for discussion.

(392 words)

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