# UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following unpublished document and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

**Vare, Paul ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3182-9105, López-Alcarria, Abigail and Olivares, Alberto (2019) Shape Shifting: Tracking the Use and Meaning of Environmental and Sustainability Education in Parliamentary Discourse. In: ECER 2019: Education in an Era of Risk – the Role of Educational Research for the Future, September 3-7, 2019, Hamburg, Germany. (Unpublished)**

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/7184

**Shape Shifting: Tracking the Use and Meaning of Environmental and Sustainability Education in Parliamentary Discourse**

**Paul Vare** (presenting / submitting)

*University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom*

**Abigail López-Alcarria**

*Department of Methods & Research in Diagnosis & Education, University of Granada, Spain*

**Alberto Olivares**

*Independent Scholar, University of Granada, Spain*

**Abstract**

How education practitioners understand concepts such as environmental and sustainability education (ESE) will inevitably be influenced by policy statements in this area. While there is rarely a direct linear relationship between education policy and educational practice (Olssen, Codd & O'Neill 2004), it is instructive to examine the discourse that takes place among policy makers so that this important factor in determining practice can be better understood. Such a study has particular significance when terms such as sustainable development are in use due to their highly contested nature (Farley and Smith 2014; Sato 2006).

This work started as a supplementary study while researching the practices and perceptions of classroom teachers in relation to ESD. Significant findings in terms of the changing nature of political discourse in ESE led to this becoming a principle study in its own right.

This paper explores policy-makers' discourse around environmental education and education for sustainable development (ESD) as well as the concept of sustainable development itself. The primary source of data is *Hansard*, the verbatim record of UK Parliamentary debate (Hansard 1968-2017). The research adopts a Foucauldian analysis of the discussions taking place among politicians in relation to ESE policy as revealed through key word searches of the parliamentary transcript. While necessarily UK focused, the methods and findings of this research (developed by an international team of British and Spanish researchers) will inevitably have implications elsewhere.

The analysis reveals the shifting nature of understandings around terms such as 'sustainable development' as well as the emergence and disappearance of related concepts. A selective review of policy texts related to the debates under study help to clarify these emergent meanings and demonstrate how such language games can translate into guidance (or lack of it) for educational practitioners.

# Method

Drawing on a Foucauldian methodology this is essentially an interpretative investigation that acknowledges the hidden nature of rules of discourse as well as the shifting meanings of any given statement. Foucault (1972) differentiates between 'archaeology', i.e. looking for rules that explain the appearance of phenomena, and 'genealogy', which identifies the shifts in meaning that take place in different contexts and over time. This study could not extend to a full analysis involving the domains of life, work and language, rather it focused on the text of Hansard, a ready made transcription of all the speech acts (énoncés) performed in Parliament. That said, some policy documents were consulted to reveal selected outcomes of the analysed discourse. At the time of this study, searching Hansard online proved to be a prohibitively time-consuming task. Each day of debate is accessed as a separate record in which tens of topics are listed. For each topic a link gives access to the transcript for that specific session. To make this task manageable, we customised a 'web scraping' programme to access all the transcripts by means of a Matlab script (Mathworks 2017). Once downloaded, transcripts were searched for keywords using Microsoft Notepad++; this provides a short extract of text around the keyword and identifies its location in the document. This facilitated further analysis of relevant text for context and meaning. A second version of the web scraper algorithm facilitated the automatic production of statistics and graphs. Key words and terms searched were: Environmental Education; Education for Sustainable Development; Sustainable Development Education; Sustainable Development; Sustainability; Sustainable. Analysis of results led to twelve initial codes under which all references could be gathered according to the broad meanings or definitions attributed to the use of terms. Two examples include 'sustainable' in a general sense to mean durable and 'sustainable' being used in relation to environmental issues. Further analysis led to additional sub-divisions within these categories.

# Expected Outcomes

This study reveals the way in which 'environmental education' (EE), first mentioned in 1968, disappears from policy discourse soon after the general election of 1997 to be replaced by 'sustainable development education' and then in 2003 by 'education for sustainable development' (ESD). After a further change of government in 2010, ESD is no longer mentioned while 'environmental education' makes a reappearance. The analysis reveals a clear preference for SD/ESD among left-of-centre politicians while only a narrow definition of EE is permitted by those on the political right. This is likely to have implications for policy and ultimately for practice in schools and, in this context, had a direct impact on the availability of guidance for teachers

with the website for the National Framework for Sustainable Schools being closed down in 2010. One of the more striking features among the data is the way in which the rate at which 'sustainable development' is mentioned. From only an occasional mention in the mid-1990s this rises rapidly in the early 2000s with high levels of use being maintained until the 2010 election after which there is a rapid decline in use. Interestingly the term virtually disappears only to re-emerge with an apparently revised meaning, i.e. a presumption in favour of economic development. Despite this apparent attempt at 'doublethink' (Orwell 1949) the internationally accepted meaning resurfaces in debates around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Hansard 2015). This highlights the importance of continuing to use the term 'sustainable development' in educational settings and in international discourse while accepting that it is contested. Indeed it is the very malleability of SD across different contexts that highlights the importance of keeping the term in play.

# References

Farley, H.M and Smith Z.A. (2014) Sustainability: If It's Everything, Is It Nothing? Abingdon: Routledge Foucault M (1972) The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A M Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge Hansard (1968-2017) Accessed throughout 2017 at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/ Mathworks (2017) Accessed August-October 2017 at: https://uk.mathworks.com/products/matlab.html Olssen M, Codd J A & O'Neill A (2004) Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy. London: Sage Orwell G (1987) Nineteen-eighty Four (first published 1949). London: Penguin Sato M (2006) Evolving Environmental Education and its Relation to EPD and ESD: Overview of the Conceptual Development Based on a Series of International Discussions on Environmental Education. Paper presented at the UNESCO Expert Meeting on ESD, in May 2006 at Kanchanaburi, Thailand