**Professional Dilemmas in Sustainable Schools: A Research Question Looking For A Setting**

[Paul Vare](https://eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/22/person/102646/) (presenting / submitting)

University of Bath

For many there is a moral imperative to ensure that education does not ignore current ecological and socio-economic crises. Yet education for sustainable development (ESD) involves a clash of values between those who emphasise education as a means of extending opportunity and critical thinking and those who seek the promotion of pro-environment behaviours.

Before UNESCO launched the Decade for ESD, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) launched its own ESD Strategy. As a member of the UNECE Strategy Drafting Group and subsequent ESD 'expert groups', I was concerned that such high level debate was detached from reality. This prompted my EdD thesis to investigate how far the introduction of ESD by teachers in a school is professionally self-contradictory.

To investigate this question, I turned to Cultural-historical Activity Theory because:

1. It views an institution as a system – sustainability is underpinned by systems thinking
2. It looks explicitly for contradictions within the system – reflecting my research question
3. The methodology involves practitioners working together in a ‘change laboratory’ – a form of action research I was keen to attempt

After several months cultivating relationships with senior staff at a local secondary school, we agreed a programme of change laboratory meetings. The school then ‘failed’ a Government inspection resulting in a moratorium on all non-teaching activity. My research was stopped.

I re-started the process of negotiating a research programme at a local university but institutional leaders called a halt to this because such research raised ‘reputational issues’ for the university.

With time slipping away, colleagues helped me identify teachers who would agree to be interviewed. As a result I conducted fifteen one-to-one, semi-structured interviews in twelve schools. My research setting had become a mix of primary, middle and secondary schools (with varying degrees of experience in introducing sustainability) across two local authority areas.

Although I could not use a change laboratory, the key elements of an activity system provided the framework for my question guide. The data was also organised into thematic groups under the activity system headings. In this way, a ghost of activity theory remained, like an archaeological relic only visible to the trained eye.

Talking to individuals rather than a group of colleagues made contradictions hard to identify. Each teacher appeared to have resolved contradictions in their practice to their own satisfaction. Instead I began to seek contradictions between the data and information found on the school websites and within the reports of school inspectors.

‘Dilemma analysis’ (see Methodology section) allowed me to sort context-specific, qualitative data into a ‘perspective document’ that, if agreed by the majority of respondents, could be deemed to be generally representative of the situation across similar schools (see Output section). By focusing on decision points, the resulting document reflects the understanding that social practices are ‘structured’ by rules, resources and power. Rather than suggest a routemap to a sustainable school, this output informs some key options. As Giddens’ concept of Structuration suggests, the possibility for change is ever present as rules are used.

### Method

This research set out to establish a ‘change laboratory’ involving staff and students within one institution – an approach underpinned by cultural-historical activity theory but this was either unworkable or unacceptable in two institutions. Instead, an activity theory framework is applied to a semi-structured question schedule to be used with teachers across a range of schools. Interview data are analysed, coded and sorted under headings reflecting activity system components. A process of ‘dilemma analysis’ is followed, underpinned by the idea that social organisations are “constellations of conflicts of interest” and therefore continually beset by dilemmas. Contradictory remarks made by respondents on a variety of issues are identified and presented to respondents in the form of a ‘perspective document’. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements. To avoid respondents being forced to 'resolve' the conflict in their response the contradictory statements were not paired together in the perspective document. Where respondents are found to agree with both of the contradictory statements, this is noted as a key dilemma, which suggests a critical decision point for teachers wishing to promote sustainability in their school.

### Expected Outcomes

The principal output of this analysis is expected to be an annotated ‘perspective document’ comprising a series of critical decision points, each presented as a continuum. Each decision or dilemma will be accompanied by an analysis of related issues that outlines some of the implications of choosing one route over another. Whereas guidance to prospective sustainable schools to date has tended to take the form of recommended pathways or checklists, this output will recognise the complexity of applying a largely theoretical concept (ESD) to a real school operating in a context of competing priorities and policy changes. The perspective document with its decision points does not present a ‘preferred’ linear path among alternatives but a complex maze resembling a plate of spaghetti with numerous decision gateways to be considered (and not necessarily in a prescribed order). The ‘correctness’ of the decision in each case will often depend upon a range of contextual features such as the culture of the school, its vision of ESD, its preferred leadership model and the policy context. Each decision point will have an accompanying analysis section to assist teachers in navigating the issue and informing debate within the school.

### References

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