

Needed: sustainable schools



Educational systems are key factors in sustainable development. Despite the country's efforts in promoting "environmental education" in the last decade of the 20th century, the absence of adequate planning and implementation has relegated these ideas to the margins of the educational system. In fact, many advances achieved in this area over the last few years have been initiated by the country's non-governmental organizations. If it wishes to engage fully in sustainable development, Cyprus must accelerate the expansion of "sustainable schools" and broaden civil society participation in the process.

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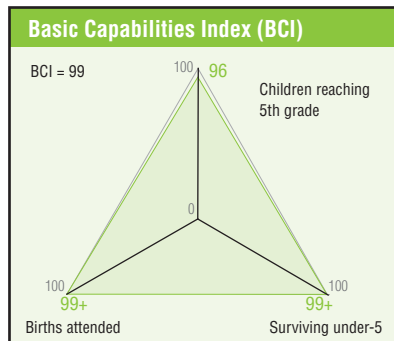
Sotiris Themistokleous
Michalinos Zemylas
Charalambos Vrasidas

In recent years the concept of sustainable development has generated debate in both scientific and public discourses around the world.¹ In this context, educational systems have been called upon to respond with educational frameworks and curricula that constructively engage the notion of sustainable development and its potential consequences.²

Sustainable development in education is not limited to the creation of curricular units on the environment. It is, rather, an all-inclusive, multi-dimensional process for reconsidering and reversing ideologies and practices concerning our relationship with the environment.³ It must be viewed as a discourse and practice that establishes a balance between sound economic development and social justice, equality and environmental protection. An educational philosophy grounded in this framework would develop in a different direction from one focused exclusively on economic development.⁴ Education for sustainable development attempts to transmit knowledge, skills, and practices that will inspire students to become engaged citizens who actively promote a better quality of life for all people, and for the natural environment as well.⁵

Sustainable schools

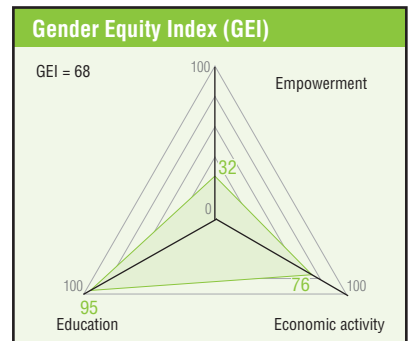
A widely used term for educational institutions adopting this framework is "sustainable schools." Their primary goal is to educate and guide students to work for a better quality of life, applying the principles of



sustainable development to improve the living conditions of all beings.⁶ A critical factor in their success is the establishment of links to local communities that serve as partners in promoting the sustainable development framework.⁷ Using this strategy, "sustainable schools" combine the educational achievements of their students with quality of life within the school and the wider community in accordance with the values of environmental awareness and critical citizenship.⁸

Environmental education

Cyprus introduced the first elements of sustainable development education with particular focus on "environmental education" in the 1990s. However, the absence of a structured educational plan related to environmental education and education for sustainable development has relegated these ideas to the margins of the educational system for almost a decade. During this time environmental education and sustainable development have had a more limited presence in formal and informal education than in many other countries.⁹ Education stakeholders in Cyprus have only recently begun to integrate ideas of sustainable development into a more holistic framework linked to



goals for a better society in a healthier environment. A major advance in this direction took place in 2005, with the ratification of the Strategy for Education and Sustainable Development in Europe.

However, despite this ratification and the subsequent establishment of the National Action Plan for Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development in 2007, the country's educational system pursues a narrow vision on the issue. Its "fragmentary" approach focuses mainly on the provision of knowledge and information about the environment, neglecting action-oriented perspectives based on social development.¹⁰

A research study on "Transformative leaders for sustainable schools," conducted between 2005 and 2007 (the time period when the two aforementioned plans were introduced), showed that 89% of primary school principals had never been informed on issues related to sustainable development.¹¹ One of the major weaknesses found in the study was that school principals were unable to define sustainable development in terms of a holistic framework that included the economy, society and the environment.¹² A majority of their definitions focused on "environmental protection." Vigorous efforts to apply the 2007 National Action Plan began only in 2009, when

1 Hopwood, B. and O'Brien, G., "Sustainable development: mapping different approaches" in *Sustainable Development*, (London: 2005), p. 38.

2 Tillbury, D. et al., *Education and Sustainability: Responding to the Global Challenge*, IUCN – The World Conservation Union (2002).

3 Network for Ecological Education and Practice, *Sustainable is more than able: viewpoints on education for sustainability*, (2002), <www.sustainabledevelopment.dk>.

4 Vrasidas, C. et al., *ICT for Educational Development and Social Justice*, (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009).

5 Saul, D., "Expanding environmental education: Thinking critically, thinking culturally", in *Journal of Environmental Education* 31, (London: 2000), pp. 5-8.

6 Dimopoulou, M., and Mpampila, E., "The role of the principal in the operation of an eco-school – the challenge to the leadership of a sustainable school," <www.aeforosxoleio.gr>.

7 Department of Education and Skills, *Sustainable schools for pupils, communities and the environment: Securing the future in delivering a UK sustainable development strategy*, (London: 2005).

8 Ibid.

9 Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment, *Revised National Strategy for Sustainable Development*, (Nicosia: 2010), <www.moa.gov.cy>.

10 Mavroudi, E., "Insufficient Environmental Education, interview with Dr. Zachariou Aravella," in *Simerini*, (Nicosia: 2009), <www.sigmalive.com>.

11 Zachariou, A. and Kadji-Beltran, C., "Cypriot primary school principals' understanding of education for sustainable development key terms and their opinions about factors affecting its implementation", in *Environmental Education Research*, (Abingdon, UK: 2009), pp 315-334.

12 Ibid.

the Ministry of Education and Culture published a new Study Programme for Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development.¹³ As the document itself declares, this is the most comprehensive effort the Government has made to introduce sustainable development into the educational system, focusing especially on the transformation of school units into “sustainable schools.”

The new curriculum indicates that the Ministry of Education and Culture now understands the importance of sustainable development not just as another school subject but as a “philosophy” that should be applied at all levels of education.¹⁴ One important aspect of this programme is its strong emphasis on the social elements of development, including concepts such as participation, inclusion and multiculturalism, along with respect for the environment. Underlying this approach is the assumption that, beyond any interdisciplinary strategy for imparting knowledge that may be required, sustainable development has to become embedded in the values of society. One consequence is that the curriculum places strong emphasis on the establishment of close relations between “sustainable schools” and the local community.

However, the heavily centralized educational system and its decision-making mechanisms continue to pose a systemic obstacle to effective transformations thereby limiting the possibility of major reform. For example, the transformation of school units into “sustainable schools” becomes very difficult without greater school autonomy. Also, decision-making mechanisms have to include the peripheral stakeholders in the education system, such as school boards, parent associations, civil society organizations and local community authorities.¹⁵ Such actors, being closer to the local community and environment, could provide more effective solutions based on the needs of each school unit and its extended social, economic and natural environment.¹⁶ The Ministry of Education and Culture can still provide overall national objectives and goals, but should also put in place a network of local actors who could develop valid and efficient practices that

incorporate the needs of communities within a more holistic sustainable development framework.

Designing on strategies

Following a year of national debate among Government actors, the Board of Ministers recently ratified the Revised National Strategy for Sustainable Development (2011-2015). The new Strategy is presented as an advance on the previous one, which covered the period from 2006-2010. Despite new elements have been introduced in sections such as natural resources, energy, sustainable transportations and sustainable tourism, the strategy for education remains essentially the same as the one laid out in the 2007 Strategy for Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development. Weaknesses in the document, such as an over-emphasis on the environment to the detriment of other aspects of sustainable development and the absence of any reference to the role of nongovernmental-actors, have been incorporated into the Revised National Strategy for Sustainable Development,¹⁷ leading to inefficiency and confusion that hinders promotion of sustainable development. These inadequacies appear to be related to Government decision-making and policy implementation processes. Ministries and public services involved in different sectors set their own priorities and follow their own strategies, often failing to forge a common national framework that encompasses all relevant actors.¹⁸ Future policy making would be more effective if the Government established mechanisms to align all stakeholders in a common strategy that has a real impact on all levels of society.

Integrating civil society: a key factor

The potential advantages of the involvement of local non-governmental organizations for sustainable development became evident through the evolution of the centres for environmental education of the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (Ministry of Education and Culture). The first centre was a private venture in a small village in southwest Cyprus, established in the 1990s. It proved to be extremely successful in researching and developing practices and tools for environmental education. Even so, it wasn't until 2004 that State authorities established the first

public Centre for Environmental Education.¹⁹ Today these centres are already considered to be pioneers in the promotion of research and development in the field of environmental education. The progress achieved so far demonstrates the potential and opportunities presented by the integration of local civil society actors in formal and informal education for sustainable development.

Although the Revised National Strategy for Sustainable Development provides guidance for the integration of civil society in the overall decision-making process and the drafting process for Strategies and Plans on Sustainable Development has been quite efficient, implementation and the impact on citizens has been less successful.²⁰ To promote and implement a more holistic sustainable development framework, the Government should make greater efforts to tap the great reserves of knowledge, experience, expertise and mechanisms of civil society organizations.

Perspectives

Since 2005, when the Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development was ratified, Cyprus has come a long way in its efforts to shift the focus of education in a more holistic direction. The country has transformed several school units into “sustainable schools,” applied relevant good practices, and provided training for teachers and other public servants. That said, full adoption of the sustainable development framework requires the Government to enlist active involvement of local actors in the decision-making process, as well as in the implementation of education strategies. To be successful in practice, “sustainable development” must be closely linked to the local community and social actors.²¹ These local non-governmental actors have a unique capacity to propose, develop and apply effective educational practices for sustainable development that correspond to the needs of their community. Moreover, citizens are more willing to adopt sustainable development policies and practices that emerge from their own community actors, including local sustainable schools.²² In addition, the integration of non-governmental actors into the decision-making processes would provide the multidimensional approach to sustainable development that is still absent from the overall educational system. ■

13 Ministry of Education and Culture, *Study Programme for Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development*, (2009), <www.paideia.org.cy/upload/analytika_programmata_2010/12.perivallontiki.pdf>.

14 Mavroudi, E., “interview with Dr. Zachariou Aravella”, op cit., (2009).

15 Mpakas, T., “Organization and Management of the Educational System: The peripheral level of Education Leadership - Weaknesses, Challenges and Potentials”, in *Primary Education and the Challenges of our Era*, seminar conducted at Loannina, Greece, May 2007.

16 Bass, S., Dalal-Clayton, B. et al., “Participation in Strategies for Sustainable Development”, *Environmental Planning Issues*, (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 2005).

17 Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment, *Revised National Strategy for Sustainable Development*, (2010), <www.moa.gov.cy>.

18 Cyprus Research Promotion Foundation, *Linking Science and Policy in Sustainable Development Research*, (Limassol, Cyprus: 2009), <www.research.org.cy/EL/user_info/scie.html>.

19 Zachariou, A., “Centres of Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development: A Report on the Network of the Centres of Environmental Education in Cyprus”, 4th KEEPE, Nafplio, (Greece: December 2008).

20 Mavroudi, E., “Interview with Dr. Zachariou Aravella”, op cit., (2009).

21 Uphoff, N., *Local Institutions and Participation for Sustainable Development*, IIED, Gatekeeper Series, no. 3, (London: 1992).

22 Ibid