

Education for sustainable development and change of social representations

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Throughout the 20th century, scientific research has greatly contributed to the emergence of an ecological awareness on the part of public authorities as well as the civilian population. The word «ecology» comes from the Greek terms «oikos», habitat, and «logos», discourse, and corresponds to the study of the interactions between the living organisms of an ecosystem (Haenckel, 1866). Research has thus made it possible to put words to these interactions in order to better understand them. However, the ecological crises of the twentieth century are generating a growing concern in Western society, which is starting, since the Second World War, to think about new ways of living. The «era of transition» is here, with the objective of finding a new socio-economic model, through new ways of consuming, producing, working and living together. In addition to ecological concerns, civil society is beginning to doubt the validity of the policies implemented by public institutions, which is leading to the emergence of new citizen movements that seek to mobilise public opinion around causes of global interest, to propose new social representations that are more ecological and to make themselves heard by the institutional world. This period of Transition, in which we have been living since the 1960s, has seen the development of numerous experiments throughout the world. In parallel to the civil population, political institutions are also becoming aware of the need to work towards a new, more ecological, world order. After the Second World War, the Earth Summits, organized every ten years since 1972 by UNESCO, contributed to the implementation of global policies for sustainable development, officially defined as «development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs». The «2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development», signed in 2015, following on from negotiations that began at the 2012 Earth Summit, is based in particular on proposals from civil society, the financial community and various other socio-economic actors. This situation highlights the fact that a cultural change is underway, since the end of the Second World War, which aims to move the currently destructive Western culture towards a kind of culture of life. How are these new ideas and practices, as well as their corollary representations, transmitted ? What consequences does this evolution have for social cooperation ?

Following on from the first Earth Summit, the Belgrade Charter, signed in 1975, provides a «world framework for environmental education». It advocates «a new universal ethic that recognizes and feels strongly the complex and ever-changing relationship between human beings and their fellow human beings and nature», an equitable distribution of environmental resources and the establishment of a system of environmental education to achieve the first two recommendations. This environmental education must concretely allow young people as well as adults to become aware, responsible and supportive of their natural environment, through the learning of new knowledge and representations. However, it was questioned in 2004, because it was considered too diffuse and insufficient, concerning didactics and pedagogy. Education for the Environment and Sustainable Development replaces it, with the objective of generalizing and harmonizing the programs, while making them transversal and interdisciplinary.

In 2007, new recommendations from scientific researchers led to the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which notably advocates the training of teachers involved in this education, as well as an attitude of responsibility towards the living, human and non-human world. This evolution is important because it is now a question of considering local as well as global spatial relationships, time scales that are situated between long term and sustainability, as well as the transmission of new citizen values specific to the protection of biodiversity.

However, this base of knowledge, now inserted in school programs and in the daily behaviours to be adopted by the population, is conveyed through the global, national and individual representations of its transmitters - political bodies, the education system and teachers. The transmission of any knowledge whatsoever cannot, in fact, be done without the representation that each person initially has of it, on the part of both the teacher and the learner. Thus, in France, teaching is very theoretical and generalized, unlike in Germany, which takes into account regional cultural particularities and the practical application of knowledge. The representations may differ according to the economic, social and environmental reality of the countries, but also according to the culture of the teachers. However, the paradigm shift implied by a culture of sustainable development requires, as a corollary, a change in representations. «Education for sustainable development must constitute a philosophy of life likely to lead everyone to make reasonable and non-rational choices as explained by economic theory» (Diemer, 2013) and yet, the political choices of biodiversity management remain very anthropocentric, which results in privileging the life of species considered beneficial for human well-being at the expense of other living species (Maris, 2014; Maris & Reverêt, 2010). These representations of Life are not in line with the values defended by the Earth Charter, signed in 2003 by members of UNESCO and IUCN, as well as many other personalities, international organisations and individuals from around the world. The Earth Charter states, among other things, that «Our environmental, economic, political, social and spiritual issues are interdependent and together we can find integrated solutions. To realize these aspirations, we must choose to integrate into our lifestyles the principle of universal responsibility, referring to the Earth community as much as to our local communities. We are citizens of both different nations and one world, where the local and the global are intertwined. We all share responsibility for the present and future well- being of the human family and all other life forms. The spirit of solidarity and fraternity towards all forms of life is strengthened by respect for the mystery of creation, by recognition of the gift of life

and by humility before our place as human beings in the universe. These inconsistencies, in the representations conveyed about Life, are found in the texts of laws, since if more and more governments grant animals the status of living beings, this is not at all the case for plant species, which are always relegated to the rank of things. Yet, gratitude, humility and empathy towards one's fellow beings, human as well as non-human, must be the priority values to be transmitted in the framework of education for sustainable development.

Faced with these challenges, a didactic as well as a pedagogical adaptation is necessary in order to transmit representations of sustainable development and of the Living World that are in phase with the contents of Education for sustainable development and change of theoretical representations.

The search for more ecology and sustainable development, since the 1960s, has allowed the multiplication of experiments in this sense, forming the premises of a complex education. Thus, more and more educational institutions are putting theoretical knowledge into practice through workshops and educational gardens. The latter allow for the contextualisation and acquisition of know-how that can go beyond mere technical expertise with conscious learning. Developing workshops and experimentation spaces in schools, whatever their level of education, can allow learners to become aware of their gestures, behaviours and thoughts when faced with daily or new acts, which are often performed in an automatic, procedural, or even irresponsible manner. Thus, more and more organisations are setting up circular systems in their internal organisation, such as the installation of vegetable gardens following permaculture methods, which will be used in part for canteens, composters, or fairs to give or exchange objects rather than throwing them away.

Moreover, educational vegetable gardens open the senses and empathy, towards humans as well as other living species, in a totally ecological context. They can also help develop techniques of letting go, adaptation and resilience.

The field of recycling also holds a very important place in the installation of a more ecological and sustainable daily life. However, there is still education to be done on this subject. It is necessary that the institutions propose sorting garbage cans in each office and each public place to constitute a reference, an example, in the eyes of the public and the employees. This also implies a rigourous approach in the choice of public markets and in the contribution of each individual.

Gradually, it seems that citizen movements and institutions are converging towards the same objective, or even joining forces to contribute to the development of these philosophies of life through practical teaching, in schools, during open houses of public and private spaces, or through the organisation of festivals. The learning of daily eco-gestures is thus facilitated by a growing cooperation. This evolution shows, moreover, the importance of the concepts of complexity and circularity, which are expressed through the links between the actions and eco-gestures of this daily life.

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