Sustainability education and radical possibilities:

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**Abstract:** Sustainability education examines the confluence between society, environment, and economy. Yet, an overemphasis on economy has historically trumped attention to the other sphere’s needs. Such an imbalance, editors David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa argue, calls for a radical reconceptualization of sustainability education. In their book, *Sustainability Education Frontiers: Critical Transformative Voices from the Borderlands of Sustainability Education*, they invite authors from ten different countries to discuss how sustainability education can be transformed to meet the needs of a diverse and interconnected world.

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**Sustainability Frontiers: Critical Transformative Voices from the Borderlands of Sustainability Education** is an edited book of 14 chapters by an international contingent of scholars who argue that education for sustainable development (ESD) needs a radical change in thinking and implementation. The co-editors are David Selby (Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Education, Mount St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia), and Fumiyo Kagawa (Research Director of Sustainability Frontiers, an international alliance of sustainability and global educators headquartered in Canada and the United Kingdom). Selby and Kagawa argue that the objectives of ESD, as posited by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), perpetuate the “delusion” that industrialized economies can grow forever on a finite planet (p. 24). The co-editors have assembled essays that inquire whether alternatives to ESD can assist in transforming the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of sustainability education. The contributors of this book respond with a resounding yes.

In the introduction, Kagawa and Selby explain that they invited contributors to unmoor their theoretical and pedagogical sensibilities about sustainability education. They urged submissions to “inhabit the borderlands of sustainability-related education” and “emancipate themselves from the trammels of ingrained assumptions, orthodoxies, habits and practices” that they believe ESD stands for (p. 13). Following the introduction, Selby outlines his motivation for this kind of invitation.

In the first chapter, he defines and problematizes sustainable development (SD) with ESD. He defines SD as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). He highlights the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s “key values” for ESD, which include statements like, “Respect for the greater community of life in all its diversity (protecting and restoring the earth’s ecosystems)” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 14). For Selby, ESD has vague pedagogical objectives, and SD has oxymoronic principles.

He argues that SD mostly affirms globalized economies’ status quo and ESD’s objectives sidestep a much-needed discussion of consumer tendencies. Selby claims that SD allows civilization to remain “in the comfortable arc of light cast by ‘business as usual’” (p. 23-24). In addition to his critique that SD itself is oxymoronic, he says that the essential characteristics of ESD (as mentioned above) are unnecessarily vague, and therefore, “are left attractively uncontroversial and unexceptional enough” (p. 23). From this critique springs his objective for the book: ESD is the diluted aftermath of compromising international powers. Thus, a radical change in how this subject gets taught is needed. Selby argues that ESD therefore presents an “uncritical scrutiny of the dynamics and impacts of economic growth and globalization” (p. 27). What is needed is sustainability education that critiques consumerism, confronts climate change denial, and seeks to get students to see their connection with the natural world (pp. 28, 33, 35). In summarizing his objectives, Selby advocates for a kind of ecological citizenship education where students become denizens: citizens of a particular place but aware of their membership in global communities.

Following Selby’s chapter, the next thirteen chapters address his and Kagawa’s call for transforming theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of sustainability education. The contributors center their work in more than ten different countries and on every continent except Africa and Antarctica. Their case studies fall roughly into two categories: those focused on theoretical transformations of sustainability education and those that contain some consideration for pedagogical possibilities. Among the book’s many strengths, three in particular stand out.

First, several of the essays identify that many assertions about sustainability education’s values are imbalanced toward western perspectives and need a reorientation to more diverse
understandings and traditions. For example, in chapter three (“Learning for Cultural Transformation: Lessons from Rural India”), M. G. Jackson prompts readers to challenge assumptions about a) what qualifies as progress and rationality and b) how one utilizes the values of ‘western civilization’ when establishing a worldview (pp. 60, 62, 69). Eloisa Tréllez Solís (chapter six: Environmental Education and Interculturality towards a Sustainable Future: Some Sources of Inspiration from Latin America) builds on Jackson’s assertion. She writes that intercultural education, in this case a return to indigenous knowledge of the natural world, can create a “convergence of identities, wisdom, and cultures” on how to live more sustainably (p. 131). Even Kagawa and Selby’s contribution (chapter 10: “Bringing Disaster to the Sustainability Agenda: The Case for Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction with Environmental and Sustainability Education) warns against presumptions of western superiority. Additionally, in chapter four (“Transdisciplinary Consumer Pedagogy: Insights From a Panoply of Pioneering, Sustainability-Related Pedagogies”), Sue McGregor notes that the objective of sustainability education should draw on “transdisciplinary learning,” where learners share discipline-specific experiences and skills and partner to create new knowledge (p. 81). Through this and the above-discussed chapters, readers are reminded that a cornerstone of sustainability education requires abandoning the assumption that a particular culture and its ideas and practices should ascend to a default status of acceptable living.

Second, some of the essays extend this sort of transformative epistemological approach to include a closer examination of animals and the human self. For example, in chapter 13 (“Learning from Wildlife Emotion: A Lacuna in Our Knowledge of Environmental Sustainability”), Steve Garlick urges learning from animals and not merely about them. Just as some authors warned against western exceptionalism, Garlick cautions against the premise of human exceptionalism. He recommends that humans need to “disrupt who they are” by accessing “animal knowledge systems” or “wildlife knowledge systems” to inform sustainability education (pp. 242, 240). Also, McGregor, in her second contribution to the book (chapter 14: “Alter-architects: Alternative Communications about Sustainability Education”), she upends a widely-accepted premise that sustainability education is a convergence between three equally-apportioned sectors: economy, environment, and society (e.g., Nolet, 2009). Instead, she argues that only environment(s) exist, and no actual boundary separates the three concepts. Upholding the equal interconnection of society, economy, and environment, she says, “inflates the importance of markets” (p. 261). Of course, she is on to something; markets certainly are not as significant as natural environments. In fact, both civilization and markets are dependent upon it, and natural environments are not at all dependent on civilization or markets.

Third, a few of the essays offer insights for practitioners and teacher educators by providing bridges between transformative theories and instruction. For example, Leo Elshof (chapter nine: “Challenging Climate “Inactivism” and Creating Critical Citizens”) presents two possibilities of framing classroom instruction about climate change: a) teaching “debate” about climate change can be framed as a failure of markets, and b) teaching “debate” about climate change can be approached much in the same way as one might teach “controversy” about evolution. Regarding this latter option, he recommends that students enhance their media literacy via a “credible spectrum” where they can evaluate experts’ motivations and integrity (pp. 168, 175, 173). Additionally, Solís (a contributor for chapter six) details how interculturality “looks” in practice via The Children of the Woods project in Peru. Drawing on more than ten years of data, the author notes that its objective of resource preservation has brought diverse groups from Andean and Amazonian cultures to foster “mutual understanding, dialog and respect” (p. 123). Insights from project participants provide some of the book’s most valuable bridges between theory and practice. A project coordinator
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reported that between participants, “The strength of the bond was palpable (p. 127). A student participant said, “At the beginning, it was embarrassing, but little by little we have understood ourselves” (p. 128). Classroom possibilities here and above provide helpful insights to practitioners and teacher educators seeking ways to morph abstractions into learning activities.

A possible weakness of the book is that a few of the chapters provide little or no understandings of how their critical and transformative ideas might translate into pedagogy. However, in fairness to the chapter authors, Selby and Kagawa’s call for contributions did not explicitly request such a bridge. Thus, works by Elshof (chapter nine) and Solis (chapter six) may have provided an above-and-beyond effort by elaborating on such relationships. Where these connections were absent, the reader might wonder how the author’s enlightening ideas translate to the classroom. For example, Lucie Sauvé outlines the tenets of an engaging and promising “ecocitizenship” in chapter five (“The Political Dimension of Environmental Education: Edge and Vertigo”). She admits that this kind of pedagogy “struggles to be deployed in the school and academic institutional culture” (p. 111). A helpful follow-up to this assertion might include what she visualizes as possible in the classroom (or might reference what she has seen work). Similarly, Gillian Jackson (chapter 11: “Re-Imagining Sustainability Education: Emotional and Imaginative Engagement in Learning”) ably draws on Rachel Carson’s call for developing an emotional connection (like wonder) with the natural world (1965). However, one might inquire how to get students to wonder about the natural world, especially for those living in urban settings.

Overall, this book succeeds in its mission -- each of the contributors put forth bold possibilities for transforming sustainability education. Additionally, the lucid writing makes the essays accessible beyond academic corridors. The ideas set forth here may find appeal among teachers, teacher educators, environmental activists, and community organizers. The book also draws significantly on how one might live a life seeking alternatives to a society increasingly defined by commoditization. For these reasons, this book may serve as a primer for individuals and groups seeking philosophical off-ramps from the thoroughfares of living and thinking so dictated by market-based approaches.


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