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Abstract

Understanding Sustainability from a Globally Perspective: Exploring the role of Education for Sustainable Development within Contemporary Education in Ireland?

Helen Foley

Sustainable Development is one of the greatest challenges of our time, which is relevant both globally and locally. Consequently, this research focused on sustainable development and education for sustainable development. Two research questions were addressed in this study, what are the challenges relevant to achieving sustainability and how can these challenges be more clearly understood? Globally, key challenges include anthropogenic climate change, resource overuse, wealth inequality and water stress. In addition, this research asked, what is the role of Education for Sustainable Development within contemporary education in Ireland and how can this role be developed? In terms of addressing these questions, from a macro perspective, this study aimed to advance understanding of sustainable development and education for sustainable development, through the development of a conceptual framework for sustainability. From a micro perspective this research aims to explore education for sustainable development barriers and opportunities relevant to the formal education system in Ireland. In compliance with the critical and interpretive paradigms, in this study the primary research was guided by ontological realism and epistemological interpretivism. A qualitative exploratory strategy was utilised to explore the research questions, aims and objectives. A total of 404 people participated in this study, facilitated by, forty-nine interviews, six group interviews and four surveys. Primary research findings showed that although the *'Education for Sustainability' The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020* was welcomed by the Irish expert panel, this panel also found this new strategy was short on accountability, aspiration and specific goals. From a national perspective, overall the role of education for sustainable development within the formal educational system in Ireland is inadequate, where education for sustainable development tends to be marginalised within the formal curriculum. Key education for sustainable development barriers include, the dominance of subject disciplinarity (functional specialisation), resistance to educational reform and adherence to the historically developed main curriculum. These education for sustainable development barriers are particularly evident at the post primary and tertiary education levels. Recommendations made in this study build on the recommendations advanced in *'Education for Sustainability' The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020*. Across the three educational levels opportunities for integrating education for sustainable development have been advanced. At the tertiary education level, sustainability issues should be integrated into teacher training and business and management education. Additionally, interdisciplinary teaching and research need to be prioritised and resourced at the tertiary education level in Ireland. Overall, the integration of education for sustainable development within contemporary education in Ireland is important, especially within the context of achieving a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy.