



# The Role of Place-based Education in Developing Sustainability as a Frame of Mind

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## *Abstract*

*As the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) draws to an end, one could pose the question: what might education's response be to a deepening environmental crisis as we move beyond the decade? Sustainability as a frame of mind presents a different perspective to that of sustainable development as a policy (the focus of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development) and therefore cultivating it through education might be a response that could take us forward. In this article we argue for an expanded notion of sustainability as a frame of mind, viewed through the lens of place-based/place-conscious education and also informed by the metaphysics of ubuntu. The aim of the article is to introduce place-based education and sustainability as a frame of mind as conceptual avenues for challenging educators to rethink environmental education as we enter an era beyond the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. We do this by conceptually exploring the concepts of place-based and place-conscious education and how these fairly new educational notions might assist in developing sustainability as a frame of mind. We also discuss the educational implications of practising a pedagogy of place with specific reference to sustainability.*

## *Introduction*

Even though the concept of place is generating increasing interest in all disciplines, the connections and feelings that people have towards the place(s) which they inhabit is an area of study that has been underemphasised in environmental education. According to Gruenewald (2003a), contemporary school reform pays little attention to the notion of place. The increased emphasis on state-mandated standards for teachers and students is aimed at achieving uniform, segregated skills and outcomes in the expectation that schools will promote them. The discourse of 'accountability' and the publication of standardised test scores in the media reinforce the assumption that student, teacher and school achievement can be measured by classroom routines alone and that the only kind of achievements that really matter are those which are individualistic, quantifiable and statistically comparable (Gruenewald, 2003a). According to Apple (2001), assumptions like these are misleading, because they distract attention from the larger cultural contexts of living, of which formal education is just a part. Such assumptions are therefore antithetical to environmental education which is concerned with making students aware of the complex nature of global and local environmental problems and the actions that could be taken to ameliorate or address them.

Many scholars in environmental education such as Bonnett (2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2007), Stables (2002), Scott (2002), (Stables & Scott, 2002) and Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b), among others, argue that scientific and technical solutions to the environmental crisis lack crucial elements and are therefore inadequate responses to the crisis. These scholars take a more philosophical approach to the environmental crisis and argue for a return to the inner self through connecting with nature. By connecting with our deepest emotions and feelings, we move to a higher level of consciousness, which enables us not only to appreciate nature more, but also to develop an ethic of care. Stables (2002:6) reminds us 'that many of our most fulfilling experiences are encounters with the non-human – often when we are alone.' He elaborates: 'We remember such things because they either disrupt, question or make us somehow aware of our frames and remind us that there is always life beyond the narrow limits of our reason: life to which we are related in some way, though we cannot understand it' (Stables, 2002:6). The most well-intentioned environmental education efforts may not resonate with such authentic experiences and understandings of ecologically and culturally appropriate knowledge, values, and ways of living in local places. Therefore we shall argue that place-based/place-conscious education and sustainability as a frame of mind could serve as potential conceptual lenses through which environmental education could enhance such experiences. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on these frameworks so as to contribute to a more expansive environmental education theory that engages students in critical learning about how to (re) connect with nature and better care for themselves, each other and the places in which they live, work and play. In what follows we will discuss place-based and place-conscious education; sustainability as a frame of mind; and the implications of the nexus of place consciousness and sustainability as a frame of mind for environmental education. We do so to explore how the nexus of place-based/place-conscious education and sustainability as a frame of mind might enable us to (re)think environmental education.

### *Place-conscious Education and Place-based Education (PBE)*

According to Greenwood (2013), the socioecological construct 'place' is not only helpful in overcoming the dualism between culture and environment, but also informs education from a grounded philosophical and theoretical perspective. Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b) claims that the current educational concern with local space is overshadowed by both the discourse of accountability and by the discourse of economic competitiveness to which it is linked. Scholars such as Berry (1992), Haas and Nachtigal (1998), Orr (1992) and Theobald (1997) assert that place becomes a critical construct not because it is in opposition to economic wellbeing, but because it focuses attention on analysing how economic and political decisions impact on particular places.

The term place-conscious education originates from Theobald (1997), but its intellectual heritage can be traced back to the ancient Greeks as well as to more contemporary critics of culture and agriculture (Berry, 1987; Critchfield, 1991; Gruchow, 1995; Jackson, 1987). Greenwood (2013) distinguishes between place-based education as a movement and methodology, and place-conscious education as a philosophical and political orientation to the field. Greenwood (2013:99) defines the aim of place-conscious education as follows:

'Place-conscious education aims to activate and integrate social and ecological awareness so that learning, ethics and politics are well grounded in the enfolded world of social and ecological experiences'. Whereas place-conscious thinking can assist in developing a conceptual framework that explicitly articulates educational purposes and possibilities, place-based education can be seen as a pedagogy that can transform schooling for all involved by offering authentic experiences in local communities and environments. According to Knapp (2005), PBE has gained increasing prominence over the last ten years in educational literature and is aimed at (re)connecting humans with the land. Gruenewald and Smith (2008) agree that the purpose of place-based education is to increase student engagement and achievement and to promote democratic participation in local community processes.

Place-consciousness depends equally on knowledge of, and experience with, ecological and cultural systems as well as the interactions between them. It also takes into account that places themselves are not predetermined but are social products, cultural products with intended and unintended consequences (Greenwood, 2013). Place-consciousness further involves reflecting on the multicultural traditions that shape places and it advocates the idea of not only learning about places but also from them directly. Greenwood (2013) asserts that place-conscious education aims to discover/recover/reconstruct self in relation to place. This implies that in coming to know a place humans should keep in mind that places themselves have something to say. It is therefore our task as humans to learn to listen attentively to places, which entails learning the diverse stories which are told about them. Although each place has a dominant story to tell, Greenwood (2013:98) cautions that we need to devote attention not only to the latter narratives, but to 'all the stories at risk of being silenced or erased, including the voice of the land itself'. He further argues that it is not just places that can be renewed, but also the minds of people. The processes of restoration, maintenance, transformation or re-membering involve the discovery of the self as much as the discovery of place.

Using place as a starting point in environmental education programmes will enable students to understand the localness of environmental problems, even those that transcend national boundaries and that solutions to environmental problems often require local action. Moreover, in rural areas where people live close to the land, place-based environmental education might help students to better understand how their livelihoods depend on the land and could also serve as a basis for integrating indigenous cultural practices and philosophies such as *ubuntu* (humanness) into environmental education processes. Through connecting with places, students in urban areas could develop greater awareness of how the local and global are intertwined and how global-local connections are evident in environmental problems.

In this article we use the notions of place-based education and the pedagogy of place interchangeably. Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) describe various characteristics of a pedagogy of place: it originates from the specific attributes of a place; it is inherently multidisciplinary; it is inherently experiential; it reflects an educational philosophy which transcends 'learning to earn'; and it connects place with the self and the community. According to Gruenewald (2003b), place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct influence on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places that people inhabit. Regarding the connection of self to place, we argue that a pedagogy of place shares some mutual ground

with sustainability as a frame of mind. We will return to a discussion of this later, but will first discuss the idea of sustainability as a frame of mind.

### *Defining Sustainability as a Frame of Mind*

The constructs sustainability and sustainable development have received much attention in environmental education discourses of the past two decades. The association between sustainability discourses and environmental education is a contested terrain. There is no place for a detailed discussion on sustainability's association with environmental education here. For a more detailed discussion on this see Le Grange (2013). Suffice to say, much of the discussion on sustainability both outside and inside the field of environmental education has focused on sustainability as a policy. This might have deepened in the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014).

Bonnett (2002a) avers that sustainable development (SD) as a policy is highly problematic, heavily contested and subject to internal contradictions. Sustainable development as a policy refers to the invocation of SD in guidelines on environment produced by inter-governmental conventions over the past three decades. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development also focuses on sustainable development as a policy. The most popular definition of sustainable development circulating in policy discourses is that of the Brundtland Commission report, which reads as follows: 'Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987:43). Although this definition is highly attractive in promising an improved standard of living if the need for conservation is satisfied, it is also highly problematic, open to a wide range of interpretations and raises severe epistemological difficulties (Bonnett, 2002b). Definitions such as that of the Brundtland Commission generate further questions such as: What constitutes needs? What should be sustained, at what level and for how long?

Le Grange (2013) avers that reference to needs in the Brundtland Commission's definition should be understood in the context of the emergence of needs discourses in late capitalist societies more generally. With respect to the latter, Fraser (1993:162) raises several questions, of which we mention two. Firstly, does the emergence of the needs idiom presage an extension of the political sphere or, rather, a colonisation of that sphere by newer modes of power and social control? Secondly, what are the varieties of needs talk and how do they interact polemically with one another? In responding to these questions, Fraser does not offer definitive answers, but rather outlines an approach to thinking about such questions. We shall not explore sustainable development as a policy any further here, but turn our attention to the notion of sustainability as a frame of mind. (For more detailed discussions on sustainability as a policy see Bonnett, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2007; Scott 2002; Stables, 2002; Le Grange, 2013). The reason for exploring sustainability as a frame of mind as an alternative approach to sustainability as policy is that the latter has done little to improve environmental risk positions. In fact, the past decade has witnessed the environmental crisis deepening, leaving the planet on the brink of ecological disaster (see Le Grange, 2012a).

The notion of ‘sustainability as a frame of mind’ posits a right relationship with nature which conditions both our attitudes towards the environment and a sense of our own identity (Bonnett, 2002b). If, however, the right relationship with nature is central to developing sustainability as a frame of mind, what should our underlying attitude towards nature then be? In order to answer this question, it is important to first clarify the concept of ‘nature’. Bonnett (2002a:1-2) explains that nature should be viewed in its most general sense as the ‘non-human, self-originary and self-arising aspects of the world.’ Conceptualising nature in this specific way raises the idea of nature being understood as a dimension of human awareness, yet independent of the human will but not unaffected by it. Nature should not be viewed as only one thing and this in turn implies that our attitude towards it will depend on the specific aspect we have in mind. Sustainability as a frame of mind is thus an integral element of authentic human awareness (Bonnett, 2002a).

Although there are no fixed prescribed steps in developing sustainability as a frame of mind, there are some key features which are central to this idea. Firstly, it requires a radical re-evaluation and re-positioning of dominant Western motives, understandings and consciousness. In fact, Bonnett (2002a) claims that this will require taking on a different metaphysics. This can be achieved by developing a receptive-responsive openness to, and concern for, nature. Bonnett (2002a) continues by stating that we appropriate nature in the intimate details of our daily transactions with our environment. By conceiving of nature as ‘the great order of things’ and acknowledging that all things, human and non-human, have intrinsic value, we develop a frame of mind that is neither anthropocentric nor bio-centric. This in itself could result in an environmental ethic which differs from other ethics on a metaphysical basis. Such an ethic which might be cultivated among students would deal with open, many-faceted, mysterious things instead of pre-defined, thoroughly knowable objects (Bonnett, 2002a). In the light of this understanding of sustainability as a frame of mind, we discuss how place-based education can assist in developing sustainability as a frame of mind.

### *PBE as Transformative Pedagogy in Developing Sustainable Development as a Frame of Mind*

Bonnett (2013) claims that in experience nothing occurs unplaced. Casey (1997:9) corroborates this when he mentions that, ‘We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact?’ Bonnett (2003) further mentions that we experience ourselves as always already beings in a world not characterised by universal laws and spatio-temporal space, but by distinct neighbourhoods, local events and communities, to mention a few. He adds that we are always to some degree claimed by the neighbourhoods in which we live. And the relationship we have with these neighbourhoods raises certain feelings, perceptions, attitudes and moods. Bonnett (2013:88) describes this as the self being locally ‘emplaced’. According to Freire (1995), human beings are because they are in a situation. Reflecting on one’s situation corresponds to reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits; acting on one’s situation often corresponds to changing one’s relationship to a place.

As mentioned earlier, the development of sustainable development as a frame of mind requires the right relationship with nature, a responsive–openness to and concern for nature. If place-based education is based on the premise of re-membering and emotionally reconnecting students to the land, it is potentially an educational approach (tool) for developing the right relationship with nature. Our relationship with nature is a reflection of our own identity and self-knowledge. The way we regard and treat nature – the whole which sustains us and of which we are a part – reveals a lot about the type of beings we are and the kind of beings we regard everything else to be. In this vein, Heidegger (1962) argues that the notion of nature which we hold defines our understanding of, and attitude towards, both the world and ourselves. According to Taylor (1998:2), our understanding of the order of things is bound up with our understanding of ourselves, and we cannot understand the order of things and our place in it without loving it, without seeing its goodness – which Taylor refers to as our attunement with it. Based on this, one can infer that alienation from nature and alienation from oneself are interrelated and the key to our ability to despoil the environment. What it comes down to is this: if we love ourselves, we will love what we believe supports us (Bonnett, 2007; Taylor, 1998). In line with this, Guattari (2001) avers that self, society and nature are three interlocking dimensions of environment. Destruction in one dimension will manifest in the other two dimensions, just as healing in one dimension will witness healing in the other two dimensions. Caring for self by implication means caring for others and nature. In an African context, Le Grange (2012a, 2012b) argues that *ubuntu* encapsulates Guattari’s three ecologies.

Following from the above discussion, one could infer that education for sustainability as a frame of mind would involve the reconnection of people with their origins and what sustains them as well as developing a love of themselves (Bonnett, 2003b). Bonnett’s idea relates to that of PBE in the sense that both (PBE and sustainability as a frame of mind) strongly advocate for an emotional reconnection with nature, the environment, the land and the self. Given that place-based education seeks to engage learners actively in exploring local environmental phenomena, we argue that a pedagogy of place could serve as the underlying concept for a reconnection and a positive orientation towards nature, the environment, the land and the self. Haas and Nachtigal (1998) affirm that part of living well involves developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in which one’s community is located.

### *Educational Implications*

So what are the implications of the above for education? By considering PBE and place-conscious education as pedagogical avenues for developing sustainability as a frame of mind, we argue that it is fundamentally a matter of possibility which is associated with opportunity, risk and openings. First of all, educators should make a gradual change in how they apprehend the world and explore the possibility of developing a different metaphysical basis for education. Although we are not in a position to regenerate from scratch the education system, which includes the expertise and attitudes of teachers, we do have the capacity to build on existing strengths. Environmental education should therefore be aimed at helping students to flourish in an authentic poetic relationship with nature. This implies that education should help learners

to properly learn to love their innate (self-arising) nature and not sell themselves cheaply to a global economism and consumerism (Bonnett, 2007). According to Reid (2002), education for sustainable development is neither fixed, isolated nor pure, and we will never be able to arrive at, or indeed present, an incontestably 'correct' version of it.

Bonnett (2007:719) furthermore suggests that environmental education should have two agendas: a short-term pragmatic agenda of damage limitation, which entails focused attention to the imaginative use of science and technology to help mitigate and monitor the undesirable outcomes of the impact of human behaviour on nature; and a long-term agenda of developing a sense of a right relationship with nature as a self-arising entity. Bonnett (2007) reminds educators that they should keep in mind that environmental education is much richer and more profound in its aspirations than the idea of aspiration that sustainable development encourages.

Returning to the notions of PBE and place-conscious education, it is important to recognise the cultural and ecological traditions which Gruenewald/Greenwood<sup>1</sup> (2003b, 2013) draws on when he introduces a critical pedagogy of place. Although we do not discuss the latter in detail, we do wish to emphasise two context-dependent goals which Gruenewald/Greenwood (2003b, 2013) views as essential for cultural and ecological renewal, namely decolonisation and reinhabitation. Whilst decolonisation involves reflecting on the places one inhabits, reinhabitation entails looking at the role that power plays in these places, among others, and is concerned with the necessary actions to change or reverse the current situation in places (Gruenewald, 2003b). As Greenwood (2013) later explains, decolonisation is primarily involved with culture and in transforming or resisting oppressive relationships that limit people's ability to control their own life circumstances. It's about learning to recognise disruption and injury in person-places relationships, and learning to address their causes (Greenwood, 2013:96). On the other hand, reinhabitation corresponds to the maintenance and creation of ways to live within the ecological constraints of a place. It has to do with learning to live socially and ecologically well in a place and not to harm other people and places. As Greenwood (2013:96) states: 'reinhabitation is a term that suggests the need to reimagine and recover an ecologically conscious relationship between people and place.' At this point we would argue, based on the concepts of decolonisation and reinhabitation, that in order for students to reflect and act on the places which they inhabit, it is in fact necessary that they experience nature first hand on a regular basis. This implies that in order for reflection and action to take place, students must be clear about why they should care for the places in which they live and in effect care for themselves. This relates to Bonnett's (2002a, 2002b, 2007) argument that we can only love and care for that which sustains us if we love and care enough for ourselves. Students can arrive at answers as to why they should care through regular authentic experiences with nature and the environment as a whole. As Gruenewald (2003a:621) succinctly puts it: 'places themselves are pedagogical'.

With respect to the classroom, it is important to note that the purpose of this article is not to provide detailed pre-specified content, because this would militate against the self-arising nature of learners and mystery associated with authentic learning. However, there are a few educational considerations which require attention. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this article imply that environmental education would need to include a critical investigation into current social, economic, political and biophysical related practices – to identify and

evaluate the motives that energise them and the ways in which we are to some extent implicated in them – how they impact the self and are activities of the self. Yet educators should be careful not to always approach environmental education as some totalising cross-curriculum alternative to the different disciplines. By doing this, they could overlook the concern with the self-arising nature of learners and mystery associated with learning. As mentioned earlier, it is in fact impossible to regenerate the current educational system. We therefore argue that the value of practising a pedagogy of place in order to cultivate sustainability as a frame of mind lies in the re-orientation of, and new approach towards, environmental education. Educators need a shift in consciousness from adopting a rigorous (in a technical sense) approach towards acknowledging the value of a more intimate, intuitive and non-logical style of encounter with the world.

Stables and Scott (2002) caution against conceiving environmental education as some holistic cross-disciplinary element. Doing this would suggest that environmental education is a single grand narrative which needs to be conveyed. Bonnett (2007) suggests that environmental education should be developed from within the differing perspectives that exist in school disciplines. Bonnett (2003b) claims that students should be engaged in enquiries which enable them to address the issues raised by sustainable development instead of preoccupying themselves with symptoms and causes, which includes the measuring of pollution levels, for example. This implies that educational spaces should be created for students to actively enquire into that which reveals the underlying dominant motives not just in society, but also the motives that are inherent in their own most fundamental ways of thinking about themselves and the world. School subjects such as Language and History are, for example, as important as Biology and Geography in cultivating a self that is place-conscious and emplaced.

At this stage one could say that the issue of developing sustainability as a frame of mind is not one primarily of formal education as it is of the general culture of the school (and society). Although the striving for a strong economy, social well-being and a flourishing environment remains a challenging task, educators still have the ability and capacity to change their existing dominant frames of mind. Sterling (2001:14–15) asserts that sustainable development can mean almost anything, including the scope for fundamental contradiction. He adds that it is best to regard sustainable development as a constant process of transformation of society. Therefore, developing sustainability as a frame of mind by means of a pedagogy of place is a matter of the ethos and practices of the school as a community and how it connects with life ‘outside’. In fact, one could say it’s about realising the interconnectedness of all human and non-human nature. Adopting this kind of ethos would inform the spirit in which the curriculum is taught and received. The gradual change to a different metaphysics could give rise to a space for intimate experience of the presence of nature in which the power and subtlety of otherness are felt. In South Africa, *ubuntu* (which means humanness) as a value could serve as the basis for a different metaphysics that connects self, society and nature. As Le Grange (2012:334) writes:

Humanness is ... inextricably bound up in the human being’s connectedness with other human beings and with an ever-changing and complex (biophysical) world. In other words, *ubuntu* involves ‘coming into presence’ ... of self in a changing social and

biophysical world. The sense of wholeness and interconnectedness of self with the social and natural by implication means that caring for others also involves a duty to care for nature. *Ubuntu*, therefore is not by definition speciesist ... , but is rather an ecosophy that connects Guattari's (2001) three ecologies: self, social and nature – self, social and nature are inextricably bound up with one another. Cultivating *ubuntu* by definition therefore involves healing of self, social and nature.

Cultivating sustainability as a frame of mind (with a metaphysics based on *ubuntu*) might require a rethinking of education – a rethinking of curriculum and school organisation. A national curriculum framework such as the current Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS),<sup>2</sup> which prescribes that all teachers in the country should teach the same subject content at the same time, disconnects the school and its learners from local places, places which in many instances have been the sources of local communities' livelihoods. It furthermore erodes values such as *ubuntu* through disconnecting learners from their communities and in promoting individualism through a largely test- and examination-driven system. Furthermore, the hierarchical organisation of schools and the strictures of time-tables are not conducive to enacting place-based education, even when an environment in which the school is located is conducive to doing so (Ontong, 2013).

## *Conclusion*

In this article we have attempted to present an expanded view of sustainability as a frame of mind by arguing that place-based and place-conscious education can be useful avenues for developing such a frame of mind, especially as we move beyond the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. We have done this by emphasising the common ground which these educational traditions share, such as the (re)connection of the self with nature, the land and the environment. Greenwood (2013) states that learning to devote attention to the land and its inhabitants and to perceiving place is not merely an intellectual exercise, but depends on a way of being in the world that itself needs to be created, recovered and continually renewed.

This article explored the educational challenge that educators face to create spaces which enable students to learn how to listen to the complex relationship of self and other, human and non-human. Therefore educators might need to gradually change the basis of their metaphysical values and adopt a more intuitive, open and poetic response to nature as a self-arising entity and the environment as a whole. This change in metaphysics would also inform the spirit in which the curriculum is taught. We have noted that *ubuntu* could serve as a basis for a different metaphysics that views sustainability not as a policy but as a frame of mind.

The challenge of cultivating and nurturing sustainability as a frame of mind through education might require teachers to teach against the grain. It would require teachers to identify ruptures within existing curriculum frameworks and school arrangements to invigorate lines of escape along which sustainability as a frame of mind can be developed through place-based education. This challenge might not be easy and require personal risk and intellectual daring – but is a worthy challenge to take up.

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### *Endnotes*

1. David Gruenewald recently changed his surname to Greenwood.
2. CAPS is the most recent version of South Africa's national curriculum and was first implemented in 2012.

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