55. Ecosocial education

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Outline of the topic

It is possible to interpret the ecological crisis as the result of a failed interaction between humans and other life. In the era of complex social and ecological crises, humans should be able to see the effects of their actions on the world around them, and,at the same time, the agency and justification of the existence of other life forms.

Ecosocial education is an educational field that questions the anthropocentric view of life and aims to reassess the relationship between humans and other species. Instead of itsown field, it may be seen as a subfield of environmental education. However, the specific focus of ecosocial education is acknowledging that humans are not the sole focus of the educational process and that learning should encompass all living beings' existence and experiences. Ecosocial education encourages a sense of empathy, respect, and responsibility towards non-human beings, fostering a deeper understanding of their needs, behaviors, and roles in ecosystems.

Ecosocial education offers novel, previously overlooked ways of perceiving reality, producing knowledge, and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships with diverse life forms. Thus, it can provide essential insights for innovation now that all sectors of society must participate in transformative actions to tackle climate change, nature loss, and air, water, and soil pollution that seriously threaten the vitality of ecosystems.

Conceptual overview and discussion

Theoretically, ecosocial education is based on the ecosocial approach, the entanglement of ecological and social perspectives. More specifically, ecosocial education is based on an understanding of ecosocialization and ecoindividuation, which are multispecies extensions of the educational tasks of socialization and individuation.

The theory of ecosocialization, drawing from ecological and phenomenological perspectives, refers to those socialization processes that occur in multispecies communities where numerous different life forms are in reciprocal relation. As a parallel process to socialization, ecosocialization occurs through the interaction of various agents, including humans and other species. Through this interaction, people acquire capabilities that enable them to participate in ecosocial communities while also changing personally.

Firstly, ecosocialization serves as a reminder that the human social community is always a multispecies one. Furthermore, it involves holistic and embodied participation in and as part of the world. Eventually, the concept of ecosocialization allows us to acknowledge the human capacity to form intimate and empathetic relationships with other living beings. Ecosocialization implies that humans are not separate from nature but an integral part of it, and that recognizing and understanding multispecies interactions are crucial for establishing ecologically sustainable communities.

Apart from socialization, education has a task of individuation. In other words, education incorporates individuals into a community and facilitates their development into unique individuals with distinct personalities. Similar to ecosocialization, the concept of ecoindividuation aims to foster an understanding of humans as individual beings who are intricately interconnected with other forms of life. However, the current obstacle to ecoindividuation, which refers to the sustainable development of individuality within an ecosocial context, is the prevailing individualistic or self-centered way of thinking. If individuals are seen as constantly competing against each other and focused on possessing and controlling others, interactions between people and the rest of life are prone to be marked by violence. The prevalent human-centric or anthropocentric interpretation of reality also contributes to the problematic framework within which individual development occurs today, a framework that is ecologically unsustainable and based on a flawed perception of the self. In the process of ecoindividuation, a person develops into a cooperative and responsible member of an ecosocial community, challenging the perception of oneself as an individualistic individual engaged in a battle against other forms of life.

Ecosocialization and ecoindividuation are processes that may happen without conscious effort or intentional educational interventions. Ecosocial education is a set of pedagogical ideas and practices informed by the recognition of these processes, and thus, its key

components are a critical re-examination of the anthropocentric worldview and attention to the senses and the body in participating in the world. Ecosocial education can be viewed in relation to posthumanist education, which is an educational area examining the relationship between humans and non-humans, including other species and inanimate matter. Ecosocial education focuses on the interaction between humans and other living organisms transpiring in a multispecies (eco)social community. By closely observing the phenomena occurring in the interaction between humans and other living beings, such as reciprocal interaction and empathy, ecosocial education also investigates the knowledge and understanding that emerges from those interactions.

Ecosocial education can help expand the innovation field's understanding of stakeholder thinking so that the significant stakeholders that drive and benefit from innovations are not only human individuals and communities but cover all life on Earth. Humans and nature are commonly perceived as entirely separate entities, leading to the belief that humans have the right to exploit nature without considering the destructive consequences and suffering they cause to others. A more systemic and reciprocal way of being can be cultivated through ecosocial education, which sees diverse individuals as mutually complementary parts that sustain life.

Application

Ecosocial education can be implemented in various settings, such as schools, colleges, universities, and informal learning environments. It often involves experiential and place-based learning strategies, including direct observation of non-human species in their natural habitats.

The starting points, principles, and goals of ecosocial education have been presented through five theses:

1) The human social community is always understood and encountered as a multispecies, i.e., an ecosocial, community.
2) Autonomy as an educational ideal is cultivated into a conception of humanity that recognizes diverse individuality and multispecies relationships of humans.
3) Participation in the ecosocial community is understood holistically: a person as a perceiving, sensing, feeling, desiring, and conscious being.
4) Cultivating interaction skills that enable ecosocial participation is essential to ecosocial education.
5) Art-based and contemplative methods have a unique ability to produce ecosocial participation, and therefore, their role is emphasized in ecosocial education.

Ecosocial education promotes the recognition that all knowledge production and sources of innovation are affected by the diverse relations and interactions that humans have with other species. This can be discussed through emergent knowledge building, which pertains to generating novel knowledge through interactions and collaboration among human individuals and groups with more-than-human communities. Emergent knowledge building is a decentralized process where knowledge is collectively created and shared instead of being dictated by a single individual or authority. It is often characterized by an open and dynamic approach, where knowledge continuously evolves and adjusts in response to new information and circumstances. In ecosocial education, it is recognized that interaction with the more-than-human world takes part in emergent knowledge-building and innovating.

The relationship and interaction between humans and other species are based on embodied participation in the more-than-human world. Thus, the application of ecosocial education focuses on arts-based, embodied, and multisensory pedagogy and practices, which can assist in innovating toward strong sustainability. Instead of novel technology, the innovations that may emerge from ecosocial education can be related to more sustainable modes of existing and operating in the more-than-human world.

So far, the theoretical literature on ecosocial education has focused on the relationship between humans and other species; thus, less research has been carried out on examining power dynamics and social inequalities between people. Further, only little empirical research has been done on ecosocial education. Therefore, it is impossible to say much about how the pedagogy of ecosocial education works in practice and how it could inform innovations in the context of more-than-human stakeholders.

Critical summary

Ecosocial education is a relatively new field of education, which has the potential to complement other close fields in education, such as environmental education, education for sustainable development, and posthumanist education. Furthermore, it can inform any field of human social life, aiming for transformative actions for more sustainable life orientation and innovation. Ecosocial education examines the phenomena in the interaction between humans and other living beings and explores the knowledge and innovation that may emerge from those interactions.

The implementation of ecosocial education faces challenges. The prevailing educational model, focused on standardized testing and narrow learning outcomes, may hinder the integration of ecosocial principles into curricula. Similarly, the business culture aiming to create shareholder value by maximizing the profits of the corporation's equity owners interrupts the creation of shared value for the common good of the whole society and the planet. Furthermore, the complex and interdisciplinary nature of ecosocial issues requires teachers, managers, and company owners to form a deep understanding of ecological concepts and pedagogical and management approaches, which may necessitate additional training and support.

Innovation aiming for creating shared value and common good for all lives thus requires a holistic understanding of how complex social and environmental issues are intertwined and how different interests and measures are connected. Furthermore, proactively responding to complex sustainability problems requires skillful interaction with diverse stakeholders, including humans, other animals, and ecosystems. Adopting ecosocial thinking in innovation means making sense of the world's complexities and the interdependent connections of various stakeholders and their actions by looking at them in terms of relations rather than splitting them into parts and under autonomous operations. The ecosocial approach to innovation extends beyond the anthropocentric worldview, and it can significantly increase the awareness that various innovation stakeholders always operate and communicate in mutual relations that create sustainable value for all.

Further readings

Foster, R., Zin, M., Keto, S., & Pulkki, J. (2022). Recognizing ecosocialization in childhood memories. *Educational Studies*, *58*(4), 560–574.

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Pulkki, J., Varpanen, J., & Mullen, J. (2021). Ecosocial philosophy of education: Ecologizing the opinionated self. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *40*, 347–364.

Salonen, A. (2014). An ecosocial approach in education. In R. Jucker & R. Mathar (Eds.), *Schooling for sustainable development: Concepts, policies and educational experiences of the end of the UN decade of education for sustainable development* (pp. 231–233). Springer.