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Article

Reclaim "Education" in Environmental and Sustainability Education Research

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Abstract: The nascent research area of Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) needs a firm grounding in educational philosophy in order to focus more on *education*. This conclusion is based on experiences at two recent conferences focusing on research in this field. Issues related to content, attitudes and long-term aims dominated at these conferences, while learning processes were often taken for granted.

Keywords: environmental education; sustainability education; educational philosophy; conference quality

Without contextualization and explicit links to centuries of relevant educational theories, research presentations at conferences risk appearing disconnected from teaching method development or evaluation. Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE), is a highly vibrant research area, benefitting from the work of hundreds of scholars all over the world. The aim of this paper is not to belittle the work done by ESE researchers. On the contrary, the quality of ESE research is evident in the various journals covering the field. Rather, this is an appeal to researchers to exercise vigilance in their claims, and to avoid focusing only on outcomes when participating in conferences. Normative statements instructing students or the general public on how to behave, or how not to behave, can be both unethical and undemocratic. We argue that ESE research can avoid such issues of normativity by incorporating elements of, and insights from, educational philosophy.

1. Introduction—The Forgotten E and the Risk of Normativity

In the following, the role of education is briefly discussed as a prelude to reflection on some of the authors' personal experiences at two recent Educational research conferences. This is followed by examples of how tendencies toward normativity and behavior modification occur and influence educational activities. Educational philosophy offers a reminder of the risks of focusing on societal outcomes and changing public behavior rather than the educational process. Previous research initiatives incorporating insights from educational philosophy are presented, followed by an example of how more recent philosophical contributions can provide inspiration for the further development of ESE research. The inspiration for this paper stems, in part, from the concept of "bad practice" as presented in Lysgaard's doctoral thesis [1]. We hope and believe that the philosophical gleanings from the study of "bad practice" can serve as examples of "good research practices" in the field of ESE.

This paper highlights the risk that, without a connection to educational philosophy, Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) research can result in normative statements that may essentially be regarded as mis-educative. All education is normative in the sense that it has a purpose [2]. The "normativity" that is problematized here is the tendency to use ESE as a platform for prescribing how the knowledge that is acquired in school should be applied beyond the learning context. Change for the "better", whatever this might mean, can be a noble cause, but it should not tempt researchers and educators to force distinct "solutions" and behavior change strategies onto students and members of the public. The importance of a critically informed and action competent public is still central in Environmental Education/Education for Sustainable Development (EE/ESD). The purpose of this paper is thus to signal the need for more democratic and student participative ESE research by providing examples of connections between ESE research and educational philosophy.

The meaning of the word education in environmental education has already been discussed by scholars like Jickling [3], who also includes sustainable development issues in the same discussion. "While environmental education is in the midst of a conceptual muddle the same can be said for sustainable development" (p. 4). Here, the muddle refers to the question of whether EE or ESD really fulfills the essential criteria of the E for education, such as enhancing the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and supporting the development of independent thought. The pressing question is how ESE research helps to "clear the waters", both at a general and specific level. The arguments regarding normativity that have been used against ESD, by for example Jickling, are also relevant when looking at the normative teaching traditions that dominate contemporary EE in Sweden [4]. Normative teaching that leans towards behavior modification seems to prevail in the often overlapping Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development, which we will henceforth collectively refer to as Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE).

Other contemporary researchers also highlight the missing E in ESE. For example, Wals and Kieft [5] discuss normativity in terms of transmissive education and instructional forms of teaching related to the space available for student participation:

> The often forgotten "E" in ESD can be conceptualized in different ways, depending on the amount of space there is for participation, self-determination and autonomous thinking. When this space is narrow, a more transmissive version of ESD is likely to result with a strong emphasis on instructional forms of teaching and knowledge transfer. When this

> space is broad, then ESD will emerge that is characterized by higher levels of participation, self-determination, autonomous thinking and knowledge co-creation. The latter, more transformative, versions of ESD require alternative teaching and learning strategies that also allow for the development of new competences ([5], p.7).

The discussion about the forgotten E focuses more on the teaching process, or the *means*—the approach to teaching and learning—and not just the *end*, such as the content to be learned or other "products" like specific behavior. Our subjective experience is that research presentations at ESE conferences often focus on things like concepts of sustainability, knowledge gaps, more ecologically correct behavior and policy issues. In this way, presenters emphasize a specific outcome or product that could be useful in the future and which is beyond the educational situation. Sometimes research is conducted from a practitioner's perspective, with a desire to change practices and everyday life. However, in such instances, reflections on the moral aspects of teaching and learning are not always strong.

In many ways, the argument put forward by this paper relates to the central question of what education is for. This is not the same as asking what education should do. The latter is often answered by traditional educational strategies in terms of how to prepare youth to democratically take part in future societal development. Hannah Arendt [6] encourages us to relinquish the view of education as a preparation for something that will come later. However, Arendt [6] also reminds us that children and adults belong to different worlds—an educative and a political—and that these two worlds need to be separated. She also emphasizes that the function of education is "to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living" (p. 195). The crucial point that Arendt raises here is that any political use of education—any "attempt to produce the new as a fait accompli" (p. 176)—can only be regarded as indoctrination. One lesson that can be learned from these ideas is that we should avoid pushing a normative agenda when involved in education and educational research. Instead, as Arendt implies, the actual educational situation is a space for explorative actions [7]. If the purpose of the teaching is to promote specific societal development, then the educational intentions ought to predict what a future society will look like. However, as no one knows what the future will bring, democratic considerations, such as whose ideas are most fruitful, why they are worth considering and in whose interests, remain central in education and ESE research.

The question "What is education for?" is expressed by Biesta [8] as the essence of "education", which is not the same as the idea of education as a treatment or intervention as a causal means to bring about particular pre-established ends.

> What is needed for education is a model of professional action that acknowledges the non-causal nature of educational interaction and the fact that the means and ends of education are internally rather than externally related. What is needed, in other words, is an acknowledgment of the fact that education is a moral practice, rather than a technical or technological one ([7], p.10).

The moral character of education leads us to conclude that normativity, or the value-laden context in which facts and actions are communicated by educators, needs to be scrutinized and openly discussed. One way of making external ESD more internally related is to start asking moral questions about what ESE means to us, *i.e.*, whose interests does ESE serve? This type of general discussion about education could also be transferred to discussions about the values of ESE research. Local

negotiations (within the research area) bring individuals (researchers) together to talk about the future of the research area and their expectations. However, claims about what research should achieve beyond the research area risk making research itself normative.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the learner is not an island. The learner cannot take fully autonomous decisions. We are all part of a culture and socialized into both explicit and implicit societal norms. What happens if the informed individual makes "wrong" decisions? If actions are harmful to society and/or nature, there ought to be some kind of legislation to prevent this type of action. It is up to the politicians to defend our "commons". When Jensen and Schnack [9] worked with action competence some pupils actually took "wrong" actions. Their argument was that it is not the task of education to make changes in society. All the actions taken were only for educational reasons, such as learning specific knowledge and developing fruitful abilities through the actions. This could be called "education for education's sake". Actions are the responsibility of each individual, and if they clash with common interests, there ought to be some kind of societal restriction through common ideologies or policies. This is not an attempt to find an easy theoretical fix, because the relationship between individuals and society will always be marked by clashes and will always need to be understood. However, it is an argument that forces the individual learner to critically navigate in a future society. The educator cannot predict how the informed learner should use his competence to act in the "best way". This is an educational dilemma, and a number of questions are available that can guide us, as educators and researchers, in the process of deciding how a critical stance towards the future should be developed. Examples of such questions are: What interests are at play? For whom? And why?

It is important to stress that the field of ESE continues to push important and necessary agendas, as demonstrated in Ardoin, Clark and Kelsey's survey of future trends [10]. Although central future topics might include community and the link between the social and ecological, urbanity and the digital age [10], these need to be linked to a more substantial interest in the educational process and the many philosophical strands associated with it. If this is not done, EE and ESD research could become a "large fish in a small pond" ([10], p. 17). In addition to pushing our own field, we also need to acknowledge our interdependence with other fields focusing on the individual, the social and nature, and benefit from and contribute to them—in other words try to avoid getting stuck in our little pond and now and then join the other fish in the lake.

We begin this paper by reporting on our personal experiences attending two conferences in 2011 and 2012 and comparing these experiences with earlier observations made in the 1990s. We do not provide proof of a development within the field, but illustrate, in two case studies, what appears to us to be an alarming tendency at ESE conferences. By focusing on the two conferences and drawing on experiences from the early 1990s, we emphasize that there seems to be long-term tendencies to neglect the educational "E" in conference presentations. The aim of this introduction is therefore to ask why centuries of work within the field of educational philosophy is so often forgotten and what this work might teach us.

2. Conference Experiences

The first conference we report on is the 11th Invitational Seminar on Environmental Education Research, held in Melbourne, Australia, in 2011, with the theme "Positioning Environmental Education Research for 2015 and Beyond: Knowledge Value and Integrity, Intergenerational and Globalization Issues". One aim of the seminar was to set the agenda for ESE research after the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005–2014 [11]. During the seminar, a variety of important discussions took place on subjects such as the scope of the research area, the contextualization of new research, journal editors' understandings of the field, organizational structures for new researchers and a common desire to expand theoretical underpinnings.

In one of the seminars, the task was to answer the question: "If I were to give you 60 seconds to describe the really hot topics in EE research in the next 5–10 years, what would top your list?" Many of the comments and ideas written up on the twelve resulting flip charts (all of which were photographed without names or possible identification and, as we did not participate in the seminar, we have no idea about who wrote what), are worth considering. These included: "the need to create small epistemic communities to handle the global challenges which are big and often make people feel fear", "the field has been too focused on school-based education" and "good work has been done related to critical pedagogy". Many of the comments related to specific outcomes such as: "ecological outcomes in urban settings", "behavior outcome and long-term behavior outcome", "develop ecological identity", "we have the science of sustainability but we are not doing it", "how can we be an activist field, in terms of making concrete difference in our field?", "they (critical of researchers in EE) ought to have had the ambition to take greater risks and make a greater impact". Overall, these comments and questions represent normative views of the tasks of future environmental education research. There is often an outspoken desire that we should achieve concrete and rapid changes in everyday practices through education.

The desire for social change seems to be strong in Education in general, and is clearly visible in discussions about the future of the research area. In light of the rich and varied body of educational philosophy, this activist "change attitudes" approach can appear rather crude. The understandable urge to simplify the challenges and methods should always be accompanied by a focus on the need to "complicate the field" and take the continuum of perspectives seriously [12]. Our overall impression was that the people attending the Invitational Seminar were good and passionate researchers. However, we also observed that the hot topic exercise revealed some of the normative tendencies that have been present in the research area for a long time. The exercise of jotting down a few keywords may in itself have led to normative expressions; something that researchers perhaps should be more aware of. Fast and "effective" solutions that identify "what works" can lead to mis-education.

The second conference experience that we would like to mention is the environmental education special interest group (SIG) at the AERA Conference held in 2012 in Vancouver, Canada. Some of the sessions were strongly focused on research and its theoretical and philosophical ties, while others included presentations that were more loosely connected to research. Several of the presentations that we attended were not properly contextualized in ESE research and had very few, if any, connections to educational philosophy. This could have been compensated for by including elements of critical reflection on the results and consequences of the topic aired. Some of the presentations were very

normative and highlighted the results to be used in practice in a way that could be categorized as "mis-educative" [13]. The recommendations were targeted at different levels of society, for example teachers/educators at classroom level and stakeholders at policy level. Our overall impressions of the EE SIG presentation were favorable, though, in that it had a lot of interesting and compelling examples of good research. However, the tendency to present "quick fixes" or fast solutions and change practices was also evident.

Research often focuses on specific goals that are beyond the actual educational situation. The normative "change attitude" approach becomes problematic if ESE researchers want to establish connections to the broader field of pedagogical research. At the AERA Conference EE SIG workshop, some of the presentations demonstrated a lack of research contextualization, a lack of basic knowledge about educational theories and, last but not least, an almost total absence of humility regarding other people's ideas about productive approaches to environmental and sustainability matters. Such a lack of contextualization could result in ham-fisted recommendations being advanced, with little room for continued input from and sympathy with other ideas, practices and theories.

The Lack of Educational Philosophy and Simplistic Views of the Role of Education

The primary aim of these two conferences was to focus on research. In this respect, the appearance of normative statements about what is right and wrong came as something of a surprise. However, in the first two examples from the research conferences, the lack of focus on educational philosophy was worrying. Over twenty years ago, Jickling [3] had a similar experience in an EE research seminar in North America:

> The first concern arises from my observations of the research seminar held during National Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)'s 1990 conference held in San Antonio. Amid discussions about quantitative, qualitative, and action research, talk about philosophical analysis was conspicuous by its absence. The lack of attention to educational philosophy, and the research methods employed by philosophers, has been an impediment to the development of environmental education. This is a matter of considerable importance ([2], p. 2).

This excerpt is an important starting point for our call to EE researchers, because it articulates worries about the future development of the research area. In order to make educational theory approaches more visible and diverse, as requested by Hart and Nolan [14], Rickinson [15] and Östman [16], all research articles might include a paragraph that illustrates which philosophical traditions they are inspired by and build on.

A relation to pedagogy makes philosophical insights important for EE researchers, although educational philosophy alone is not enough. As one philosopher put it: "I'm a philosopher by trade and philosophers rarely write really useful books" [17]. EE researchers want to make a difference—but should not try to achieve this in an undemocratic way.

One of the authors of this paper describes the grounding principle of his work as research with a (postmodern) post-structuralist-pragmatist perspective, while the other terms his approach speculative-realist. But these labels are not intended to limit or polarize our approaches. Rather, identifying our

general approaches is a way of understanding and criticizing our own theoretical and philosophical habitus and hopefully continuing to develop our work. Whether deliberate or not, all research has some form of philosophical vantage point, which in turn is highly influenced by geographical and historical backgrounds. A simplistic description of early EE would arguably name psychology and a focus on behavioral outcomes as major sources of inspiration. This continues to be an important part of the ESE research tradition in the USA and other countries. In Australia, the UK and the Netherlands, sociology has been influential, while the French have favored their own philosophical traditions. Scandinavia has at least two ESE research traditions. The first is rooted in German psychological traditions and is closely related to the continental concept of "didactics". Didactics is an academic discipline in its own right and is in English either called education or curriculum studies. A second tradition is connected to early sociology and inspired by Dewey's focus on the "socio-cultural". When researchers meet at conferences, these different traditions often "confront" each other, although this is not always a problem. What can be a problem is when we as researchers are not aware of or explicit enough about the educational and philosophical assumptions of our ESE research. Difficulties can arise from ESE researchers who have specific ecological positions and consider education as a tool with which to achieve specific long-term ecological and/or societal goals.

The field of EE research is approaching its fiftieth anniversary while educational philosophy is often considered to have begun with Plato's work more than two thousand years ago [18]. The specific areas of interest of ESE research could thus benefit from centuries of ideas and theories about the role of education.

3. Examples of Tendencies towards Normativity and Behavior Modification

The problems associated with normativity and the tendency towards behavior modification can be approached and introduced by researchers in many different ways. In this section, we present three specific examples. The first example shows that an important aim of research is to make normativity more visible by studying top-down generated concepts, such as ESD, in order to show what kind of interests benefit from this type of policy level implementation. The second example illustrates how this type of normative education can limit students' development. If the results are expected to produce solutions to specific long-term problems, beyond the educational situation, they could be considered as normative. A third example is when education is seen as a tool for societal change. Here, education is not an end in and of itself, but rather a means to achieve an outcome outside the actual educational context. Such research applies an instrumental view to education, neglecting the learning process in favour of measurable societal outcomes. Despite being goal-oriented, there is a danger of missing the goal.

3.1. Societal Goals Hinder Informed Action

Jickling and Wals [13] warn researchers that the hegemonic concept of sustainable development (SD) actually hinders the development of education. According to them, ESD can even be called "mis-educative" because the normativity, or pre-determined actions for a specific future, reduces the possibilities for students to act themselves and thereby develop as autonomous and informed individuals. ESD can be a way of letting market forces guide education and lull people into a neo-liberal way of thinking about e.g., economic growth, trade and consumption. In policy discussions

about the benefits of ESD, the expectation is often that education will direct students towards the fulfillment of aims at a macro level, in the sense of preparing "all learners for working life and responsible citizenship aware of rights, duties and sustainable development" [19]. A normative education that focuses on particular societal goals can be disadvantageous to the participating individuals and their development of personal abilities or action competences. In such education, there is little room for students to practice more informed actions. In situations where students have more room to manoeuvre, SD can be an interesting and challenging concept for discerning the different stakeholders' perspectives [20].

3.2. Individual Normative Long-Term Purposes and Aims

Jickling and Wals [13] also put forward several objections to the concept of ESD and arguments for a well-developed EE. In short, they claim that ESD is not a good path to take and that a subject-integrated EE could help society and nature to develop sustainably. Although most educators agree with this general goal and forward looking goal there is a risk that such long-term aims could govern the actual teaching situation. There is a danger of focusing on these long-term outcomes to the detriment of the learning process. If the overall view of education is that it ought to achieve a certain aim, the result may be unproductive tensions between the best *means* of reaching that specific *end* [8]. In this case, a well-developed EE is seen as the best way of making our planet more sustainable. Too much focus on identifying "best practices" or figuring out "what works" can be a problem in an educational sense, because all methods are context specific. Experts who claim to know the most effective teaching methods can in fact limit educational development. This discussion about a well-developed EE shares a common desire with ESD to reach specific long-term goals. Striving to design a specific educational programme that seeks to attain particular goals regarded as prerequisites for achieving a long-term "good"—such as "saving the planet"—runs the risk of normativity. Such education has a greater emphasis on reaching an indeterminable end than educating and developing the critical capabilities and action competences of the pupil. This way of talking about EE resembles the earlier criticism of the concept of ESD. Long-term purposes and goals create tensions between normativity and democratic participation.

3.3. Education as a Normative Tool

The often instrumental, policy-level view of education indicates what kind of knowledge, attitudes or abilities people should learn in order to fulfill certain ideas at societal level. The main ideas of ESD can relate to areas such as aid issues, embracing better lifestyles and attitudes, public knowledge about energy-savings, or how to sustain economic growth. The common denominator for these examples is that education is the tool that makes these specific changes possible. Education should equip people with tools for the future. The educational situation is a *means* towards a predetermined *end* [8]. Education becomes more normative, as does research if the aim is to find out how to develop these specific tools. The two examples of normative education for societal change and as a tool for change are quite similar, although tool development can also be the focus of, for example, NGO work in local conservation efforts or specific resource saving projects. NGOs and policy levels often work in a normative phase of education.

4. What Can Educational Philosophy Remind Us about the Lure of Normativity?

Below, we raise a number of issues linked to the important role of educational philosophy when doing research in ESE. Here we highlight earlier initiatives from ESE research and, towards the end of the paper, describe recent philosophical inspiration that ESE research can relate to.

4.1. Study the (Empirical) Educational Situation

There are other possible starting points for education research than societal, long-term individual aims or developing tools for specific aims. For example, education research could start with the learners' interests and be closely connected to educational philosophy, views and key concepts like student participation. This indicates questions for future research to study more closely, such as: What are the learners' demands for or interests in change? In this section, and with reference to some selected educational philosophers, we suggest that research should focus both on the present and on educational situations, and resist the temptation to develop grand ideas of future applications and notions of what the future should look like. Dewey [21] referred to being mesmerized by visions of the future and looking too far ahead as aiming beyond the "ends-in-view". According to Dewey's philosophy, education should be situated in the actual moment and solve the complex issues contained within a school project, and not focus on a specific long-term goal or develop tools that might be applicable in future situations. This type of situation includes teacher teams in subject integrated projects offering learners opportunities to develop informed personal competences without first clarifying specific long-term goals, or where or how they should be used [20]. This type of competence building would enable them to participate in societal work according to their own ideas and experiences about what kind of knowledge or individual or collective actions are needed [22].

4.2. We Do not Know What the Future Holds

According to Dewey, education should start in the present situation, in the educational process, to develop individuals' personal qualities [23]. Education aimed towards expected future outcomes limits the possibility for growth in the educational setting. With a focus on the here and now, students who are able to conduct, participate in or "live through" democracy in education are offered opportunities for growth that develop and prepare them to act in ways that their actual living situations allow for [24].

Individuals want to grow and society also grows and changes: "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" ([23], p. 47). Growth and education have no aims beyond themselves for a specific future. We can, of course, imagine what the future might be like. Scenarios can be imagined, examples given and history scrutinized, but it will never be possible to say for certain how individuals will live their lives 5, 10 or 20 years from now. As researchers and educators, we should be aware of the difference between *knowing* and *believing* [1]. Although we do not know what the future will bring, this does not stop us from imagining possible future scenarios. Believing in a better world might be a good personal motivator for us as researchers—it certainly is for the authors of this paper. But we should be careful not to impose our beliefs in the likelihood of scenarios on educational activities, because these beliefs might derail the educational effort or, even worse, prepare students for a "future" that could turn out very differently. In

this perspective, normative descriptions of the future are impediments for growth and learning. Preparing for a future duty or privilege diverts the attention of both teachers and learners from the only fruitful point; namely, taking advantage of the needs and opportunities of the immediate present ([23], p. 73). From an educator's perspective, this is about helping students to take part in contemporary discussions about a good life and the future. "An ability like problem solving is for Dewey not simply about finding the right means to achieve a particular end" [8]. This can be interpreted as the educational situation being here and now, and that it is not possible to predict the outcome of a long-term purpose after education—an *end*—without simultaneously looking at the present *means*.

Education is a diversity of encounters where identities and experiences are simultaneously used and converted [25]. Dewey [26] calls these encounters between people their environment transactions. Through these transactions, students acquire different kinds of knowledge and values that can be described as the relation between their actions and the consequences of their actions, and not just factual knowledge about the world. Students learn through participation and others' actions [27,28] in the present moment. What this learning might mean for the future is an open-ended discussion.

4.3 Research must not Be Normative

"Experts" must not point out the "best method" to achieve future goals such as modified individual behaviors as good life-styles. Societal discussions about norm development, using research results, are the actual consequences in practice of research. Research can only empirically study what has already happened, or the actual activity when it is happening [21,23]. The need for empirical studies should not be confused with discussions about "evidence-based" practice. Biesta [8] discusses the normativity that occurs in discussions about the need for evidence-based practices. This type of research is often designed to point to the "right" or "best" way of teaching a specific topic with the overall intention of effectively reaching a concrete goal. Biesta [8] expresses concern at the lack of democratic insight or public control in the research results arrived at by experts. In the "name of science", the democratic rights of teachers and learners to be involved in the design of learning situations are in danger of being set aside. "Practical educational research can study what "worked", not "what works". The results can enhance professional problem-solving and make it more intelligent—nothing more and nothing less" ([8], p. 18).

The important task for educational research is to identify, test and evaluate different educational activities and apply insights to new theories in the field. Research can also play a valuable role in helping educational practitioners to acquire and visualize different understandings of their own practices. Helping teachers to better understand and acknowledge teaching habits and norms could be a way of facilitating reflection and thereby making a deliberate change of practice possible. Individual teaching habits are often rooted in disciplinary traditions that are not shy of emphasizing educational ends. Two of the three EE selective teaching traditions found in Sweden focus on "products' such as knowledge (factual tradition) and specific attitudes (normative tradition), while teachers working mainly in the pluralistic tradition are more focused on the process [29,30].

Educational research needs to highlight the different kinds of research and educational cultures, such as disciplinary traditions, non-formal contexts and international and religious backgrounds that serve as tacit webs for the selection and negotiation of ESE methods and content. The cultural role of

educational research is just as practical as the technical role. The view of the technical role of education dominates the cultural options and their tacit framings, in that it focuses on the production of *means* for given *ends,* and reduces research questions to matters of technical efficiency and effectiveness [7].

One common point of departure for the issues raised above is for empirical studies to be closer to the educational situation. Rather than looking at "what works", the focus should be on the contemporary developments that are occurring in schools in non-formal and informal settings. According to many researchers and philosophers, educational research can only be conducted through an empirical method that is close to teaching practice and indicates what teachers, educators and learners are doing. The results can only be understood in terms of the consequences of the deliberate changes that are made according to the research findings and the purposes of the actual education [8,21,25,31].

5. Earlier Initiatives that Highlight the Importance of Educational Philosophy

5.1. Examples of Initiatives

Several initiatives in ESE research have tried to connect an increasingly fragmented research area with the philosophy of education. The intention with this paper is to promote such an approach at conference seminars, workshops and presentations, rather than in the entire research area. There have been long discussions in books and journals about how to improve the ESE research area. Several research classics, such as that by Robottom and Hart [32], clarify the need to leave the often instrumentally conducted quantitative research for the benefits of qualitative research. In their research review, Hart and Nolan [14] ask for extended starting points in educational philosophy in order to develop new methodologies, e.g., that can involve students as active contributors to research, rather than just being regarded as passive recipients of taught knowledge. Rickinson [15] also asks for extended philosophical roots for the research area in order to fill in some of the research gaps relating to students' worldviews. Researchers' or adults' worldviews of the future as frames of mind are discussed by Bonnett [33], who asks questions like: "How can we judge which actions will positively contribute to sustainable development? Even if the "ends" of a policy are clear and regarded as unproblematic, are we in a position to judge the means? If not, how does one construct a policy in a situation where in practice it is impossible to avoid every action which *might* have detrimental consequences for the environment?"([33], p. 11). This is a reminder to researchers who may think that they have ready answers to future applications. What we can say beyond the ends-in-view is also an important ethical dilemma in ESE research. Stables [34] reminds us that the human–nature relationship is culturally constructed and encoded in language. Language is not just a mirror of the real world, but is a way of approaching the world at large [35]. Telling people which actions to take is a minor part of the whole communication issue between people regarding future societal development. Another way of understanding this is to stress that teaching for a specific future is not enough, and that education should preferably be a common democratic negotiation within a specific cultural context.

Scott and Gough [36,37] frame ESE issues and discuss the importance of learning and the fact that the development of a sustainable learning society is replacing many of the earlier aims formulated by "environmentalists". They [36] warn that having too strong a focus on ecological issues could turn ESE into something that is reserved for "left wing activists". This value-laden context could result in

people shying away from working for a sustainable future. A strong normative bias and focus on behavior modification can often have the opposite effect. Teaching that includes normative views of what the solutions and the future might look like can scare students away from environmental issues, because teachers are too engaged in their own personal "crusades" to let students participate and have any influence [38]. In such cases, students often distance themselves from their teachers' ambitions to change the world.

Several special issues of Environmental Education Research (EER), such as Volume 8(3) 2002, have looked at "exploring the gap"—the lack of causality between knowledge and behavior—that is closely connected to normativity. Students have the relevant knowledge, but do not always use it in the way educators expect. Normativity and connections to modern philosophy in general are also discussed in EER. For example, the EER special issue of Volume 11(4) 2005 linked ESE research to philosophical issues and innovative social science research by discussing postmodernism and methodological considerations [39]. As Paul Hart (ibid) argues, the mainstream of environmental education research has still to come to grips with the potential of qualitative genres such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism and critical theory within the frames of "post-discourses": postmodernism, post-structuralism, feminist post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Research methods acquire meaning within different frames of meaning. Also, as researchers we need to learn how to express our political and value commitments (ibid.). This is about researchers" responsibilities to frame methodologies within broader perspectives of meaning-making, as well as the need in conference seminars and presentations to offer the theoretical starting points of educational philosophy and possible "discourses". In Reid's extensive editorial [40] about the means and ends in research, he argues that *"responsible researchers are those who think out loud about how they frame, explain and disseminate their work"*. Research generally needs to pay less attention to "success stories" and "new horizons. This type of research is often conducted in limited research contexts, and can be regarded as "private games".

5.2. A Proposal for Framing the ESE Research Area

Payne [41] discusses how ESE research could be delimited, structured and organized, and also the fact that a major issue for journal editors is that many manuscripts are not sufficiently contextualized in the research area. Another issue is that research innovation seems to lag behind environmental education curriculum and pedagogical practices [41]. Empirical research based on practice can be a way of moving the research forward. Researchers need to work in closer proximity to practice and understand that "sustainable development is inherently a learning process that needs researching by/with those involved in the dynamics of such learning" ([12], p. XVii). All too often, research takes the form of an evaluation of curriculum programs or pedagogical interventions, and is vulnerable to allegations of being a-theoretical:

> Much research is, in fact, not conceptually and/or theoretically driven but is "evaluation" where, basically, an intervention is devised and its variables are identified and measured for significance of change. The dominant approach to evaluation mirrors a conservative positivist view of knowledge production and value, and a reductionist view of the sample and the phenomena under study. Evaluation studies typically use a semi-experimental

> design and case or comparative study approach where, typically, a classroom intervention is developed and implemented, then "measured" via pre and post testing for "short term" knowledge and/or attitudinal change that might occur but only in a specific context ([41], p.66).

In order to go beyond intervention studies, such as those described above, Payne discusses "framing" research as a way of understanding the "internal flow" in environmental education research, such as obvious assumptions, hidden interests, values and globalizing structures at individual and collective levels [41]. He describes four dimensions that need to be addressed in a research manuscript: *conceptualization, contextualization, representation,* and *legitimization*. *Conceptualization* is about developing a "conversation" right from the start about what kind of problem or gap is of interest. In this imaginary conversation, questions are raised that relate to a shift of focus from learning and teaching to meaning and embodied meaning as precursors for research. Are the starting points in educational philosophy, ideology, or elsewhere? Researchers need to be clear about their intentions and "speak out loud" about their work [40]. *Contextualization* is a description of the study context, for example in formal, informal and what/where objects of study. *Representation* is about re-presentation, re-search and what we choose to present in the light of earlier research and educational philosophy, *i.e.*, what piece of new knowledge is formed here, and how should it be understood in relation to earlier studies and knowledge traditions? The results can never be more than partial re-presentations of what has already been studied. Representation is a crucial dimension of how prescriptive and normative research results are apprehended by a conference audience. Presentations that focus on the data in the research process and rely on a more open-ended inquiry enhance the number of possible perspectives for the audience. This leads us into a discussion about *legitimization*, *i.e.*, what possible general claims can be made from a study and its results and what is "valuable" or beneficial for research and practice? "Sometimes they (researchers) hide behind truth claims that are not plausible or credible" [41]. A limited representation can lead to too strong claims of the value and consequences of the results for practice, which then give a normative character to the research. In Payne's [41] suggested research framing, the normativity risks seem to be generated in the *representation* and *legitimization* processes.

Many of the classics have not been mentioned in this short retrospect. However, if all the contributions to ESE research, conference presentations and manuscripts aligned with what is stated in for example Payne's research framing [41], our experiences of the two earlier named conferences might have been very different. These "classics" from research literature, together with other important writings omitted here, can also be complemented by a recent philosophical and explorative study of the educational desires of NGOs. Scott and Gough [36] discuss the close relationship between environmental education and ESE research and activists and NGOs, which indicates that activism—or normativity—as a lifestyle could to some extent have been infused into ESE research. This new example can show ESE researchers a great deal about what is happening in the educational activities of NGOs. There are some resemblances to ESE research regarding conference presentations in general, which also seems to be an on-going habitual practice.

6. An Example of Philosophical Inspiration

The field of ESE is suspended in the wonderful web of theory and philosophy that deals with different aspects of the social, the individual and nature. The process of being inspired by and applying

philosophical insights might often start in the field of educational philosophy, but this should not prevent the continued work from learning from neighboring and innovative fields. Author two was invited to co-author this paper after Author one had read his dissertation entitled "The Educational Desires of Danish and Korean Environmental NGOs" [1]. Although this study relates to educational theory, it also draws on the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Although both these men are often regarded as being far removed from practice or even obscure, their arguments and insights can be applied in order to improve our understanding of educational and learning processes. In this case, the theories of Lacan and Žižek are linked to an abductive research process, and the results relate directly to the field of ESE. The study has a non-normative approach, which means that open-ended questions are met with open-ended responses. The hope is that the analytical process could lend a voice to the empirical data without forcing pre-determined visions or notions of right and wrong onto it. The abductive process of constantly moving between theory and data was used to prevent philosophical inspiration turning into "theoretical violence" and to keep the focus on the potential of the data. The study thus focuses on how the interplay between theory and practice can reveal important aspects of meaning-making processes in the educational activities of environmental NGOs.

The Significance of Bad Practice

Lysgaard's study [1] relied on interviews with key people from several Danish and South Korean environmental NGOs and aimed to understand the *significance* of engaging in non-formal ESD and not "just" getting caught up in the process of describing what is going on. This focus on the significance of educational activities and environmental NGOs' perceptions of the public as a learning entity led to an analytical emphasis on the role of the dreaded "Bad practice". While the on-going focus on "best" and "promising" practices represents an important tool in the promotion of ESE, a detour into the importance of the more common bad practice can help us understand why it remains so stubborn. This shift has the paradoxical potential of strengthening the practices of non-formal ESD, in that it widens both the scope of inquiry and consciousness about what constitutes the field of practice and, coincidentally, paves the way for developing more "promising practices". Lysgaard borrows the concepts of "interpassivity" "false activities" and "pseudo activities" from Žižek to emphasize the types of reoccurring ESD activities that often predominate among environmental NGOs. Of course, the hope is always that interactivity and true participation will take place. However, it is often the case that in discussions about the nature of this "interpassivity" with environmental NGOs and their members, the outcomes do not always live up to expectations. When environmental NGOs are involved in organizing demonstrations, engaging the public and pushing campaigns, the hoped for best practice is often hard to find. When young NGO members organize demonstrations and activities, NGO staff can remain passive and hope that the youth will change things, When the public or even corporations get involved and still fail to realize that little has changed, the activity may either be false, or everybody may be frantically pseudo active in order to avoid the obvious contradictions between what the ideal proposes and the reality demands. By keeping this "Bad practice" and the significance of it in sight, and not desperately looking for good practice, we might learn a lot more about the educational processes that take place. If we put this perspective into a formal setting, it might be possible to study

teachers' practices and describe their teaching failures. The idea here is not to point fingers, but rather to understand teachers as human beings that make mistakes. Like anyone else, teachers have ideals and ambitions, but also arguably fail to reach these high ideals on a regular basis. The focus could instead be on how daily activities that are not deemed successful by the teachers themselves also create meaning and motivate the continuance of a process that often seems impossible. Rather than focusing on the possible obstacles and barriers as something that must be swept away, they can, with the help of educational philosophy, be a way of understanding the significance of teachers' and students' tacit frameworks, hidden agendas or un-reflected starting points. Focusing on mistakes without relating them to educational philosophy or existing research will probably only generate new suggestions for teaching activities that do not align with what is already known, and could risk ending up as "Bad EE research".

From this perspective, educational Bad practice could be understood as a situation where the answer to a failed teaching strategy is that "more of the same is needed". The hope seems to be that more information and facts will make people change their behavior. NGOs and educators in other traditional normative environmental education still believe in this insufficient activity or "Bad practice". But why do people continue with such inefficient work? One way of understanding it is that Bad practice is a coping strategy when working with complex issues like ESE. By opening up a discussion about Bad practices we, as educators and researchers, could perhaps focus on the meaning-making processes in our daily work by recognizing the importance of impossible ideas and ideals. Pushing for "complete" solutions to social challenges is not possible—it is often Bad practice [1]. However, this does not mean that we should abandon the goal of finding solutions, but rather that we should focus our intention on the significance for the individual teacher and researcher of pursuing the impossible. The social is extremely complex, and an important part of working with ESE is to engage the social and try to understand the individuals and groups that constitute this. Everyday Bad practice can be understood as a way for educators to make meaning of the social by introducing ideals and notions of right and wrong in a tumultuous and ever-changing field. If we fail to recognize that daily Bad practice, linked with the urgency of sustainability issues, can end up in false or pseudo activities, no visible progress will be made in the actual issues at stake. One way of reflecting on why and for whom educators and researchers are doing this is to acknowledge the importance and significance of Bad practice.

7. Conclusions

Many EE/ESD researchers are educators with an interest in environmental issues, and some are also members of environmental NGOs. However, the personal connection to these important issues could blur the fine line between educator/researcher/activist. The results of an individual's work could become too goal-oriented and focus on changes in practice, which in turn could make recommendations normative and prescriptive. By asking questions about educational practices, and even bad practices, with starting points in educational philosophy, there will be better chance of the "E", Education in ESE, being prioritized, rather than the activist state of mind of "taking action now". At present, a great deal of what is called EE/ESD research does not adequately deal with "E" in conference presentations. This makes a call for more focus on the "E" necessary, together with the importance of linking to educational philosophy in order to ensure progressive research that draws on

the work of the present and the past. We would like to stress that we truly believe that a stronger connection to educational philosophy could strengthen discussions about the purpose and role of education in the ESE research area. This could make the small "pond", that at times seem to restrict our movements, bigger and help to clear-up the "muddle" that was recognized in the early 1990s [3]. "New fish" from other parts of educational research might populate the pond and add or contribute to the on-going process of generating new knowledge in the ESE research area. These "fish" might come from the fields of social justice, intercultural education research, human/child rights research or the myriads of other interesting fields that work with the question—what is education for? We do not see any drawbacks in the field having closer ties with the established field of educational philosophy, because our own research and work could be strengthened by a more intimate relation with others navigating the educational field.

This inspirational example regarding "bad practice" will hopefully help ESE researchers to see the possible benefits of including more philosophical enquiries in their work. Are we in fact guilty of "false activities", "pseudo activities" or even instilling a sense of meaning by repeatedly doing the same kind of research in similar ways? Are there tendencies towards "bad practice" in the ESE research area? In our view, collective research reflections would ensure that any "bad practices" in the ESE research area are better understood and perhaps turned into dynamic and constructive good practices.

Issues related to educational philosophy have remained largely unchanged since the NAAEE conference in San Antonio some twenty years ago. The purpose of this paper is therefore to appeal for critical reflections on possible "bad practices" in ESE research and to emphasize the vital importance of a more democratic and participatory ESE. Guidelines are already in place for the framing of research in order to avoid the contemporary problems of loose connections to educational philosophy and un-reflected normativity when discussing the consequences of research results. In short, EE and ESD should not risk being regarded as mis-educative.

This paper also raises questions as to why centuries of thinking about the role of education in educational philosophy are often forgotten in a new area like ESE research. As Dewey [42] pointed out, philosophy should be used to support the discernment of practical problems:

> Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with problems of men. The elaboration through philosophical thoughts has to made through application to all the disciplines which have the intimate connection with human conduct: to logic, ethics, aesthetics, economics and the procedures of sciences formal and natural ([42], p. 8).

The ESE area is connected to research into human conduct at a personal lifestyle level and misconduct at a global environmental level. The discussions linked to human conduct from an environmental and climate perspective have a tendency to be normative and orientated towards changing individuals' behavior. That this perspective has been far from successful is obvious when looking at the rising levels of carbon dioxide emissions and the increase in the number of environmental and climate challenges. Discussions with a greater link to the strong philosophical core of education could help ESE research to find alternative ways to that of normativity, and invite people to democratically participate in individual and global change.

We are quite comfortable about writing a somewhat normative paper about the need to develop a research and practice that is much less normative. A paper is, *per se*, normative. Here we have spoken "out loud" and hopefully shown, through the selected examples, our starting assumptions and intentions. Our desire for change is based on the need to connect research to educational theories, and thereby reduce the number of normative "activist" statements hitherto common in ESE research conference activities.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interests.

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