

Twenty Years of China's Education for Sustainable Development(ESD) Program: Review and Prospect

Qiaoling Wang*

Institute of Lifelong Learning and Education for Sustainable Development, Beijing Academy of Educational Sciences, Beijing, 100036, China

Abstract: The basic characteristics of China ESD program is: The dual attribute of the definition of ESD; A new interpretation of the subject-oriented education theory from the perspective of sustainable development; ESD is an Important Content of strengthening morality education; the “whole-school” model has become the norm; an international cooperation and exchange platform has been actively built.

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***Corresponding author:** Qiaoling Wang, wangqiaoling2003@163.com

1 Introduction

In September 2015, President Xi Jinping attended the United Nations Development Summit and all leaders unanimously adopted the “Change Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, which became the programmatic document guiding global sustainable development for the next 15 years. It also marks the global sustainable governance has opened a new chapter. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) acted swiftly to launch a new round of global ESD action plan (2015-2019) based on the experience of ESD decade (2005-2014). On April 25-27, 2018, at the Third Member States Dialogue Conference on ESD in Costa Rica, UNESCO launched a new phase of “ESD for SDGs”, emphasizing that ESD plays a foundational and guiding role in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), and ESD is getting attention increasingly in the world.

It has been twenty years since the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO has commissioned the Beijing Academy of Educational Sciences to implement the UNESCO EPD Education Program (later renamed as China ESD Program) in 1998. More than 1,000 primary and secondary schools in 13 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities participated in this program and it became a very influential program in China's basic education. At present, considering the national vision of ecological civilization 2035-2050 described in the report of the 19th national congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and the China's education modernization 2035, as well as the latest international trends of UNESCO ESD, it is essential to review the 20 years history of China ESD program, to reflect its basic characteristics, and to clarify the future direction of cultivating the leaders of ecological civilization construction.

2 Proposing the dual attribute of the definition of ESD

After years of careful exploration, the research team has proposed and demonstrated the basic definition of ESD: “ESD is based on the needs of sustainable development, which aims to help educate to learn the values, scientific knowledge, learning ability and lifestyle required for sustainable development, thus promoting the sustainable development of society, environment, economy and culture.”^[1] This definition clearly points out that ESD includes promoting social, economic, environmental and cultural sustainability and promoting sustainable human development, and emphasizes the importance of fostering a future-oriented quality of sustainable development. This theoretical connotation enhances

the conventionality of the concept of ESD, emphasizing the social function of ESD to promote the sustainable development of society, economy, environment and culture, and points out the sustainable development of human beings is the core of ESD. It embodies the essence and wisdom of Chinese traditional culture such as “physical and mental integration”, “self-cultivation and governance” and “harmony between man and nature”. It is not only the expansion and deepening of the connotation of international ESD, but also the guiding concept of China’s ESD practice.

3 A new interpretation of the subject-oriented education theory from the perspective of sustainable development

The program team combined the human subjective spirit with the needs of social sustainable development, and made a distinctive new interpretation of the subject-oriented education theory. That is, there are three states in the development of the subject’s subjectivity: the suppressed state, the positive development state and the excessive publicity state. When the subjectivity is in a state of repression, the subjectivity manifests itself as dependence and slavery. The subjectivity is a shrinking one, which inhibits and restricts economic and social development. When the subjectivity is in a positive development state, the subjectivity is expressed as a positive subjective spirit, which is a constructive and can promote the stable and sustainable development of the economy and society. When the subjectivity is in an excessively publicized state, the subjectivity is subjective and random, and the subjectivity is a destructive one, which also inhibits and restricts the development of the economy and society. To this end, cultivating individual subjective consciousness and innovative spirit is the basis to achieve sustainable development; cultivating people’s “class-based” spirit is the highest requirement to achieve sustainable development; cultivating a large number of talents for sustainable development is the key function of education in the new era. In a long period of time, this theoretical view has played a positive guiding role in promoting ESD.

ESD is an Important Content of strengthening morality education

A very important part of moral education is the education of social responsibility. The greatest sense of social responsibility is to think about the harmonious and beautiful life of human beings^[2], which is not

only for modern people, but also for future people. In 2010, ESD was written into “The National Medium and long-term Education Reforms And Develops the Plan Summary (2010-2020 Year)”, and integrated into the 13th Five-Year Plan of Education Reform and Development in 2017, and into Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in 2018. Therefore, ESD is an important part of building people in virtue.

The “whole-school” model has become the norm.

Under the guidance of the “six elements” standard, China ESD Experimental School integrates ESD into philosophy of school management, curriculum and teaching, thematic education, quality assessment, campus environment, and school social cooperation. The research team investigated 49 ESD experimental schools in Beijing Dongcheng District, Shijingshan District, Tongzhou District, and a survey of 797 teachers and 1,950 students on quality of sustainable development was conducted. The survey shows that the implementation of the “whole-school” model for ESD has achieved initial results.

In terms of the integration of ESD into school management, the highest proportion agreed (relatively+completely consistent) by teachers surveyed is: I have seen ESD related content in the three to five year development plan of the school (76.5%); the highest proportion disagreed (relatively+completely inconsistent) by teachers is: the school has set a special fund for teachers to carry out research and practice of ESD (11.0%).

It can be seen that the principals of some ESD experimental schools adhere to the belief of ESD all the year round and deeply understand the dual connotation of ESD promoting social, economic, environmental and cultural sustainable development and people’s sustainable development. Among them, more than one third of the people have been able to actively integrate the concept of ecological civilization and ESD into the school’s educational philosophy and planning, and systematically explain the role of ESD for the school development, and regard it as an important guide to the development of the school.

The survey results show that the student’s ability for teamwork has the highest score, with an average of 4.12, followed by the ability to participate in the construction of a green society with an average of 3.97. The students of the China ESD Experimental School are changing from “learning to test” to “learning to change the

world”, and the awareness and practical ability of responsible citizens are gradually improved.

In terms of teachers’ use of education and teaching methods advocated by ESD, the teachers interviewed indicated that the highest proportion of adopted method (used+frequently used) is: I use question-and-answer heuristic teaching in teaching (88.1%); The teaching points and methods of implementing ESD in subjects and interdisciplinary teaching are well known to most teachers. It can be seen that discovery-based learning, problem-based learning, system-based learning, interdisciplinary learning, and other new forms of teaching and learning have emerged, and school education is moving toward sustainable development.

The construction of campus environment reflects the ecological civilization thinking and embodies the responsibility of school education to promote sustainable development. According to the survey, in terms of campus environment construction, the highest proportion of items includes: the school pays attention to integrating the sustainable development values into the overall design of the school campus environment; use new technologies and equipment to save water, energy, land, materials, grain and protect the environment; advocate students to participate in campus construction. It can be seen that the concept of ecological civilization “harmony between man and nature and harmony between people” is contained in the construction of campus environment.

In the questionnaire, school support and guarantee mainly include: cooperation with and support from social organizations (museums, universities, cultural heritage, NGOs, enterprises, etc.), professional support (training, expert guidance, policy support, financial support). It can be seen that cross-sector cooperation and expert guidance play a huge role in the cultivation of students’ quality of sustainable development.

Using the regression method, the measures affecting student values identification and habit formation are analyzed. The results are as follows. Support and safeguard measures of school can positively affect students’ values and habits. ($t=3.11$, $p=0.003$).

4 An international cooperation and exchange platform has been actively built

The research team paid early attention to the timely tracking of the latest developments in ESD conveyed by UNESCO’s major conferences and documents, and conducted continuous and in-depth comparative study. While docking international standards, and interacting with other countries’ peers, the research

team has observed and analyzed the experience of other countries, integrated Chinese and foreign parts, found the common ground for communication, and made the latest deployment of the program. At the same time, the program team has created the brand of “Beijing International Forum on ESD” and has successfully held seven international forums on ESD^[3]. It has become an important platform to disseminate Chinese perspective and Chinese voice on ESD. In addition, the program team also set up a communication platform for the Asia-Pacific experts on ESD, trying to build a system for dialogue and communication, and vigorously promote China’s ESD program to become an international leader. Finally, through the Newsletter, the Chinese cases and stories on ESD will be submitted to UNESCO regularly to enhance the influence of Chinese education in UNESCO.

The development of ESD has achieved fruitful results in the past 20 years. Currently, in the context of the 2035-2050 ecological civilization vision and the global 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and lifelong learning, China’s ESD is facing new challenges, such as the lack of essence and clear boundaries of concepts and connotations, the discourse dilemma of ESD, the lack of top-level design of lifelong learning systems to mainstream ESD, and the construction of partnerships between school and society etc. Based on China’s successful experience in promoting ESD in the last 20 years, China’s ESD may need to consider the following promotion strategies: Firstly, we need to further deepen the essence of ESD, consolidate the core of ESD, and build a key concept system as the logical starting point to promote ESD. Secondly, Assessment system for ESD should be developed at the national level and be included in the framework of education modernization 2035, which is the top-level design and approach to mainstream ESD. Thirdly, ESD for CSDGs is a new way. It is necessary for China’s education system to pay close attention to China’s Sustainable Development Target System (CSDGs) and its new challenges and requirements for education. It is necessary to study in time how to adapt to such new challenges and requirements to push ESD to new heights.

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