



It Takes a Whole School: A Synthesis

24

Birgitte Bjonness, Ingrid Eikeland, Astrid Sinnes,
and Arjen E. J. Wals

The whole-school approach offers a structure and language to exchange and celebrate diverse educational perspectives, priorities, and practices. Our goal in assembling this collection is not to offer a blueprint, a narrowing solution to problems of schooling in contemporary times, but to share promising and inspiring cases, to provoke dialogue and open conversations, but also to question, resist, struggle, and break with restricting traditions and orders. Of course, all schools are unique, contextually rich, complex, dynamic, and ever-evolving. They are educational communities, education homes assembled through scholarly expertise, professional practices, institutional structures, and lots of dedication, love, and care. Professional growth, Maxine Greene writes, requires a “quest for a better state of things for those we teach and the world we share” (Greene, 1995, p. 1). This quest brings together the innovative practices outlined in this collection. Here, we showcase diverse professional communities reflexively engaged in working together, teaching and learning together, in particular contexts and times. We offer this book as

an invitation to think differently about schools and schooling. Above all else, this invitation is deeply educational. In this closing chapter, we highlight tensions, common threads, and noticeable absences that might inform the future development of the WSA in our pursuit of a world that is more sustainable than the one currently in prospect.

24.1 Transitioning Versus Optimizing

This book has brought together a wide range of perspectives on what a whole-school approach to sustainability can entail. Whereas there is the common thread of a more systemic approach to addressing sustainability, rather than an “add-on” approach, there are different ideas about the meaning of both *systemic* and *sustainability*, but also differences in where to emphasize bringing about *deep change*. Roughly speaking, there are those who use one of the petals of the WSA flower as an entry point with some starting with professional development of staff, some with the school’s architecture, some with the agency and empowerment of the members of the school community, some with a concrete sustainability topic like the school’s energy supply or addressing climate change, some more on school–community relationships. There are some who seem more comfortable in working within the existing

B. Bjonness · I. Eikeland · A. Sinnes
Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway
e-mail: birgitte.bjonness@nmbu.no;
ingrid.eikeland@nmbu.no;
astrid.sinnes@nmbu.no

A. E. J. Wals (✉)
Wageningen University & Research,
Wageningen, The Netherlands
e-mail: arjen.wals@wur.nl

structures and frameworks, tweaking them a bit, optimizing them, incrementally improving matters, while others seem convinced that a whole-system redesign based on different values, principles, and ways of working is the only way a school can systemically work toward sustainability.

The idea of sustainability as something to embody, to enact, and to live, connects with this redesign perspective. One could say there are at least two distinct pathways: the optimization pathway and the transition pathway. The optimization pathway takes and accepts the current system as a given, while the transition pathway considers the current system as highly problematic. Incremental change simply won't suffice from this perspective and, in fact, makes matters worse as it solidifies these existing systems and structures risks and might even distract from what is really needed.

The optimization pathway might be more successful in getting school-wide support as it stays closer to people's comfort zones and might be the only way to change often conservative schools and the communities of which they are part. The more radical transition pathway risks not having the support base and the commitment from all stakeholders involved and running into resistance. The transition pathway only seems to have a chance in a somewhat special environment, with a special kind of leadership, a high level of joint commitment among all stakeholders, and at least some policy support.

In line with the optimization approach, we see some efforts to present the WSA as an implementation problem in that there can be steps, indicators, benchmarks, and assessment schemes that can guide this implementation. More in line with the transition approach, we see schools and their stakeholders considering the WSA as something that needs to unfold guided by continuous monitoring and reflection where people in the school community together try to figure out what sustainability means and how schools can contribute to it coming into being. This also implies that attention is guided towards giving voice and developing agency among the key actors in the system, including the young people, as well as

considering matters of diversity, also inviting dissonant perspectives, and inclusion, bringing in those who tend to be side-lined, and thereby too often silenced. For people who like to plan, manage, and avoid surprises, as many school leaders and teachers do, the transition approach is a rather unsettling and uncomfortable path to embark on.

Culture and related policy environments also play a role here. At the meso-level, school culture influences the possibilities for enacting a WSA to sustainability but so does a country's culture in terms of space for autonomy, voice, and freedom to co-design. In more egalitarian societies with tendencies toward deliberative democracy, a WSA might be realized easier than in more authoritative societies with hierarchical decision-making structures. Attempts to develop a WSA in the latter context might receive more resistance. This is not to say that developing a WSA in the former context is easy, as we see resistance there too and how fragile innovations can be (see, for example, Chap. 15, Leite). When a culture of testing and measurement and the ambition to score high on the PISA rankings drive educational policy at the national level, the environment for developing a WSA tends to be rather unfriendly. In countries where such a culture of accountability is under pressure, as student and teacher motivation are low, and the relevance of education for today's world is being questioned, spaces for a WSA do open up.

24.2 Boundary Crossing

No matter what pathway is chosen, a WSA calls for boundary crossing between different parts of the educational system and society through promoting collaborative cultures and participation. A WSA in its very nature calls for an "all on board" mentality to change schools in fundamental ways. These aspects are frequently brought up and grappled with throughout the contributions in this book, both through a theoretical and practical lens. Thus, making boundary crossing a bold spot in the WSA discourse.

The contributions include examples of multi-stakeholder collaborations, spanning students, teachers, school leaders, other staff, parents, researchers, politicians, NGOs, and other community members. To create connections and synergies between different stakeholders in the educational ecosystem is an ideal vision to strive for in a WSA, coming together with different perspectives to shape and promote sustainability education (see, for example, Chap. 12, Eikeland and Sinnes; Chap. 14, Manni et al.; and Chap. 21, Rumjaun and Atchia). This entails new structures promoting horizontal power relations and distributed leadership, collective decision-making, and creating shared visions, to name a few. To practice boundary crossing thus calls for cultures where it is unavoidable, and necessary, to become uncomfortable together and deal with uncertainty (see for example Chap. 18, Hargis, and Chap. 23, Shibakawa). Furthermore, to sustain these collaborations demand resources, time, a high level of coordination, competency in practicing collective decision-making and creating environments that nurture a culture of sharing and learning from and with each other (see for example Chap. 11, Borg et al.; Chap. 4, Gericke et al.; Chap. 21, Rumjaun and Atchia; Chap. 10, Vanderveen et al.; and Chap. 5, Verhelst et al.).

The support given to the schools needs to be context-sensitive to the individual school's ethos and culture (Koh & Askill-Williams, 2021). Multiple contributions in this book point to the fact that schools need to lead their own journey toward sustainability and educational innovation, rather than this being a fixed path provided from the outside. Furthermore, that schools should be provided with the support to build their own reflexivity competency, being able to continuously rethink and reorient their educational practice, to adapt to a constantly changing nature of sustainability issues (see for example Chap. 7, Field et al.; Chap. 2, Mathie; Chap. 19, Phillips and Howard; and Chap. 13, Shintesetseg et al.).

To practice context sensitivity and collaborative cultures spanning a diverse group of actors, calls for a movement toward co-research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) where participants to a large degree have an active role in shaping and influ-

encing the knowledge and experience built around a WSA (see for example Chap. 22, Phuti).

24.3 Student Voice

A critical factor in a WSA to sustainability is the voice of the students (Torsdottir et al., 2023). The book includes cases where students are included in a direct way through observations, interviews, and written feedback (see for example Chap. 17, Ballegeer et al.; Chap. 16, Mathisen and Johansen; Chap. 6, Morin et al.; Chap. 15, Leite; and Chap. 20, Nordén), or in an indirect way through teachers' voice (see Chap. 9, Hugo and Iversen). There are also many chapters that highlight the importance of student engagement through theoretical and policy-based lenses of student-centered education through ownership, empowerment, inclusion, participation, and democratic citizenship (see for example Chap. 8, Rončević and Rieckmann, and Chap. 3, Zachariou et al.).

Looking back at the chapters in this book, one might conclude that student voice in the sense of a student's capacity to access and influence decision-making processes, especially beyond the classroom, does not feature prominently. To further promote a focus on student voice is also strengthened by the backdrop painted by the contributions in this book reporting that students have a very limited sense of empowerment when it comes to ESD issues, and where students, teachers, and others struggle with getting used to new roles and power dynamic when practicing a student-centered education. This might be seen as a blind spot or a weak spot as student voice, agency, and participation are not only returning themes in environmental and sustainability education, but they are also recognized in article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

In his dissertation on student voice in the classroom, Jeroen Bron (2018) points out that student voice means more than simply learning to speak and/or use freedom of speech. Rather it refers to a student's capacity to access and influence decision-making processes. Based on a

literature review Bron identifies five arguments for giving students a voice in education and curriculum development:

1. “Normative: Young people are entitled to the right to have a voice in matters that affect them.
2. Developmental: Many children and young people assume responsibility and exercise autonomy outside school. However, they are seldom offered this opportunity within. We regard students as citizens with developmental readiness to participate and assume responsibility within school.
3. Political: Inviting students to participate in curriculum design changes the power paradigm, providing opportunity for voices that are often marginalized to speak and for those in positions of power to listen and hear.
4. Educational: Participation in negotiating and decision-making processes has educational benefits, contributing to the development of citizenship and twenty-first century skills.
5. Relevance: Involving students in curriculum development adds significant stakeholders in the curriculum discussion, improving the relevance of curricula.” (Bron, 2018, p242).

In a WSA, student voice can be or should come in when considering all elements of the flower, not only in curriculum and education but also in school ethos, leadership, identifying professional development needs of staff, shaping school-community relations, and in finding ways to make the school itself more sustainable. The fact that student voice in decision-making processes remains somewhat hidden in the book, seems to indicate that schools either do not see its importance or struggle to find ways to open up spaces for the systemic embedding of student voice. In a study on development toward a WSA in Mongolian schools (see Chap. 13, Shinetsetseg et al.), student voice was particularly found to be a struggle as it is a completely new culture. Interestingly, several of the schools in this case did manage step by step to create a culture for collaborative decision-making especially enjoying the student voice as part of the process.

24.4 Decolonization

As we have entered a time of sensitivity toward phenomena of exclusion, abuse of power, revisional histories, and marginalization of indigeneity, along with associated polarization and radicalization, schools will also need to grapple with a heavy and loaded topic of decolonizing of education, especially but not exclusively, in the Global North. This is a complex and ongoing process that involves recognizing and addressing historical and ongoing colonial legacies, biases, and inequalities within educational systems. While the importance of inclusivity and diversity is acknowledged in some of the chapters, only few contributions are entering this terrain by emphasizing the importance of including perspectives from historically marginalized groups, including indigenous knowledge, literature, history, and contributions from various cultures and backgrounds (see Chap. 7, Field et al.; Chap. 18, Hargis; Chap. 19, Philips and Howard; and Chap. 8, Rončević and Rieckmann). The decolonizing perspective also points at the revitalization of indigenous and local languages within educational systems. In terms of capacity building for staff, cultural competencies might need attention as well so that teachers and school leaders can better understand and respect the cultures, traditions, and histories of marginalized communities.

In terms of pedagogy, a more critical pedagogy, one that encourages students to critically analyze and challenge colonial narratives, stereotypes, and power structures, might be needed. Such a critical approach aims to expose tensions, inequalities, and exploitation, as well as the underlying mechanism and processes (Andreotti, 2007, 2011). Sund and Pashby (2020) argue that education needs to explicitly interrogate coloniality as a central condition of today’s global issues, and to acknowledge it as a key element of, what they refer to as, ethical global issues pedagogy that centers on “delinking as a decolonial praxis.” This delinking has several activities, including: the exploration of multiple perspectives that reflect different worldviews and narratives and explore and engage with the complexities

and contractions between them, and “denaturalizing” dominant one-sided narratives (on progress, development, consumption, etc.) and recognize how these concepts are socially and politically constituted.

24.5 Posthumanism and Rewilding

Another emerging trend in environmental and sustainability education that still needs to find its way in the WSA discourse is the rise of posthumanism (e.g., Duobliene & Vaitekaitis, 2021), rewilding (e.g., Carver et al., 2021) and wild pedagogies (e.g., Blenkinsop et al., 2022). Posthumanism encourages humans to extend moral consideration to nonhuman entities, fostering a greater sense of responsibility toward the natural world. This shift arguably can lead to more ethical and sustainable ways of living. Nature-inclusive education and wild pedagogies place nature at the center of the learning process and emphasize experiential learning in natural environments that fosters a deep connection to the natural world. These parallel streams that have quite different roots but likely will intersect in the years to come, advocate a decentering of the human and recognizing and strengthening our entanglement with nature. Posthumanism and wild pedagogies offer complementary insights into how we can foster a more sustainable relationship with the natural world (Paulsen et al., 2022). Posthumanism encourages a shift away from anthropocentrism, while wild pedagogies and rewilding provide a practical framework for nurturing a deeper connection to nature and promoting sustainable practices rooted in the life world (Jickling et al., 2018).

Whereas the WSA to sustainability tends to emphasize problem-solving and working on issues around health, well-being, climate, inclusivity, biodiversity, and so on, not much is being said about our relating to and our relationship with other species, our surroundings, and the affordances of immersing ourselves with other beings without being inhibited by misplaced superiority. The idea of more eco-centric and

relational ways of being and creating schools that invite such a way of being is still in its infancy.

24.6 Levers and Ways Forward to Make a WSA Possible

As educators we are obligated to ask what schooling ought to mean in an era of social and ecological uncertainties. We cannot lose schools entirely to discourses of management, accountability, and efficiency. A WSA seeks to recognize that schools matter way beyond PISA scores and individual performance. To energize projects and prospects of schooling is to awaken and listen attentively to those involved, to embrace dialogue and institutional questions, and reflect on institutional histories and responses.

This book provides a collection of diverse educational perspectives and practices from educational communities worldwide. There are promising practices and perspectives that hopefully inspire ways forward. Throughout the book, we find examples of the importance of educational policy building, social and material innovation, and practicing holistic and connected rather than siloed approaches to sustainability. The continuous reflection and dialogue between different practitioners in community of practices is highlighted as vital to shape and promote a WSA.

We also find blind spots revealing a need to pay closer attention to those traditionally cast to the shadows, marginalized, and thereby too often silenced. A WSA calls for a more diverse and inclusive perspective which “highlights the connections between viable interdependent ecosystems and viable interdependent communities—and that our future depends on maintaining the widest possible diversity in cultural approaches to sustainable living” (Bowers, 2005, p. 148).

In the end, we are talking about good education here. In an ideal world, we should not need to call for the importance of paying attention to sustainability in education or the need to advocate a whole-school approach *to sustainability*, as it would be what schools are doing by default. As we are approaching 2030, the year the SDGs

and the Paris Agreement should be realized, we can only hope that a new normal in education will be emerging, one where a whole child can enjoy a whole school in a whole community nested in a whole Earth. 2030 might be a bit too optimistic, but at least we are seeing niches unfold that show promise in realizing a much-needed transition in education and society at large.

References

- Andreotti, V. (2007). An ethical engagement with the other: Spivak's ideas on education. *Critical Literacy, Theories and Practices*, 1(1), 69–79.
- Andreotti, V. (2011). (Towards) decoloniality and diversity in global citizenship education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(3–4), 381–397.
- Blenkinsop, S., Morse, M., & Jickling, B. (2022). Wild pedagogies: Opportunities and challenges for practice. In M. Paulsen, J. Jagodzinski, & S. M. Hawke (Eds.), *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Re-wilding education for a new earth* (pp. 31–52). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90980-2>
- Bowers, C. A. (2005). How the ideas of Paulo Freire contribute to the cultural roots of the ecological crisis. In C. A. Bowers & F. Apffel-Marglin (Eds.), *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the environmental crisis* (pp. 133–150). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers.
- Bron, J. G. (2018). *Student voice in curriculum development: Explorations of curriculum negotiation in secondary education classrooms* [Doctoral dissertation]. Universiteit voor de Humanistiek.
- Carver, S., Convery, I., Hawkins, S., Beyers, R., Eagle, A., Kun, Z., ..., Soulé, M. (2021). Guiding principles for rewilding. *Conservation Biology*, 35(6), 1882–1893.
- Duobliene, L., & Vaitekaitis, J. (2021). A Posthumanist approach to human/child-centred education. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 26(2), 37–50. [https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202112_26\(2\).0003](https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202112_26(2).0003)
- Greene, M. (1995). Art and imagination: Reclaiming the sense of possibility. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(5), 378–382.
- Jickling, B., Blenkinsop, S., Timmerman, N., & De Danann Sitka-Sage, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Wild pedagogies: Touchstones for re-negotiating education and the environment in the Anthropocene* (pp. 1–22). Springer Verlag.
- Koh, G. A., & Askill-Williams, H. (2021). Sustainable school-improvement in complex adaptive systems: A scoping review. *Review of Education*, 9(1), 281–314. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3246>
- Paulsen, M., Jagodzinski, J., & Hawke, S. M. (Eds.). (2022). *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Re-wilding education for a new earth*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90980-2>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. SAGE Publications Ltd.. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607934>
- Sund, L., & Pashby, K. (2020). Delinking global issues in northern Europe classrooms. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 51(2), 156–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2020.1726264>
- Torsdottir, A. E., Sinnes, A. T., Olsson, D., & Wals, A. E. J. (2023). Do students have anything to say? Student participation in a whole school approach to sustainability. *Environmental Education Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2023.2213427>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

