



Concept paper

## **The concept of the Whole School Approach – a platform for school development with focus on sustainable development**

by Reiner Mathar (March 2013)

*This paper draws upon reflections, discussions and state of the art evidence from practical implementation of an international network of experts and leaders from ministries, universities, teacher training institutes and NGOs in India, Germany, Mexico and South Africa.*

*As a think tank, the ESD Expert Network jointly develops and realizes innovative concepts and strategies to strengthen individual competencies and institutional capacities to implement Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the participating countries. Concepts, materials and experiences are shared with a broader professional public through international conferences and the network's website [www.esd-expert.net](http://www.esd-expert.net). The network and related implementation activities such as trainings for multipliers of ESD in schools and an ESD leadership training for young professionals are supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).*

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Sustainable development, the key outcome of the Earth Summit in Rio 1992, can only be achieved if all people of all ages participate and accept new/different ways to become a sustainable society. Understanding education not merely as instruction, but rather as a process of involvement in the process of future orientation, future planning and creation of a sustainable future, education is one of the main strands of development in the field of sustainable development. The world summit in Johannesburg held in 2002, focussed mainly on this issue and led to the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014.

One of the summit's outcomes was that education for sustainable development should be firmly established within all sectors of education: kindergarten, basic education, secondary and tertiary education and finally all types of non-formal education. A prerequisite for this is, however, that sustainable development should not be seen as a closed concept with given solutions. It must be considered as an on-going process, finding new and best solutions. That's why education for sustainable development should introduce the concept of life-long learning to everyone at school. While children stay at school, they need the possibility to develop and realize their specific concept of life-long learning. Against this background, there is a need of change within the whole education sector. Not only teaching, learning and student's participation need a change, the cooperation with the local community and partners in the society as well. Instruction must be replaced by co-construction between students, teachers, parents, partner and experts from outside schools. Different areas of cross-curricular education, like environment education (EE), health education, education for democracy etc. can be doorways to ESD. The combination of these areas leads to the concept of



ESD. Taking this into account, the concept of the whole school approach follows the worldwide development e.g. initiated by the World Healthy School Association ('Linking health, equity and sustainability at school', Geneva, July 2010). The impact on the concept of the Whole School Approach will be shown by describing the elements in detail later on.

The general change of education towards education for sustainable development means that school must be seen as a role model for sustainable development. Pupils and students stay an increasing part of their life at school, thus more and more part of real life experiences must be offered and realized at school. This includes the question of food and consumer's education, social learning, energy use and personal resource management. Furthermore, school is the perfect place to reach a whole generation in a protected area. Young people can test and develop their main life skills and their own lifestyle. The understanding that sustainability is the guiding principal will help schools to develop.

In the 2012 UNESCO Report 'Shaping the Education of tomorrow'<sup>1</sup>, Eco-Schools<sup>2</sup> are discussed as an example of a whole-school approach to sustainability:

'The key message that comes from the story of Eco-Schools success has to be that for change to happen, power must be disseminated to the point of implementation. Schools are dominated by students. They are the ones who act as the eyes and ears of behavioural change. Develop the schools processes and systems to support student led change. Eco-Schools highlight that ESD is not just about curriculum content, but a whole of school body, whole of school mind set and whole school action process. The case study also acknowledges that change is slow, incremental and is only sustainable if genuine models of participatory learning and decision making form the basis of the process.

The greatest gift a school head teacher can give to his/her students therefore, is the gift of freedom for self-directed and purposeful learning, supported by structures and processes that empower and engage with real life ecological issues.

The lessons of Eco-Schools also highlight that those who create the ecological footprint need to have opportunities to reflect and understand what it means to be part of the environment, the effects one has in all the different interconnected cycles and biomes of life and to be involved in and control of remedial action or proactive measures.

Ultimately, Eco-Schools are a process that becomes a way of life. A cultural paradigm for school administrators to master through delegation and a belief in their teachers and students capacity to change the school from the ground up.'

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO 2012: Shaping the Education for tomorrow, p. 61

<sup>2</sup> Eco-Schools is an international program of environmental and sustainable developmental education for schools. [Foundation for Environmental Education](#) (FEE) is the founder of the programme and Eco-Schools is just one out of their five programmes. It is a management and certification programme where students are involved in the decision-making process and activities. The aim of Eco-Schools is to raise students' awareness of sustainable development issues through classroom study and community action. The *themes* that the students can involve in are *water, waste/litter, energy, nature and biodiversity, school grounds, transport/sustainable mobility, healthy living, noise, local agenda 21 and climate change*. By March 2010, the programme was implemented in 47 countries, involving 32,000 schools.



Since 2009, the international ESD Expert Network (Germany, India, Mexico and South Africa), initiated by GIZ in 2010, has discussed the existence of a common understanding and a common concept of school development in the field of ESD. Within this discussion, the network put emphasis on the particular situation in the four countries. They exchanged concepts and ideas how to improve ESD on a common level. The concept was also introduced, discussed and adjusted in the Leadership Training for young professionals developed by the network in 2011-2012. The discussion included the exchange of different and common developments in the four countries with emphasis on three aspects:

- education in general,
- school development in detail, and
- guidelines and directions of curriculum development.

The network worked with / took into account already existing studies on school development and ideas of the Whole School Approach such as the study of the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability and the British S3 Concept.<sup>3</sup> While the Australian study investigates ways in which learning for sustainability can be mainstreamed in teacher education, the S3 Concept<sup>4</sup> of the British school inspection offers an interesting self-evaluation instrument. It presents a great possibility to interlink different aspects of sustainable development and education for sustainable development, by identifying different doorways to ESD, e.g. on ESD-practice at school with a focus on:

- food and drink,
- energy,
- water,
- travel and traffic,
- purchasing and waste,
- school buildings,
- school grounds,
- inclusion and participation,
- local well-being, and
- the global dimension.

The transition from different areas of ESD to a whole concept means that different 'cultures' of cross-curricular education need to be considered, especially in the following areas: environmental education, education for global development, health education and education for democracy. All these contribute to ESD and are linked in several areas of cooperation and common fields of action.

ESD relates to many other 'adjectival' educations that touch upon SD or SD components (UNESCO 2012). A figure in the UNESCO-Report on ESD, 2012, gives a clear picture of this linking and names a few: environmental education, human rights education, climate change education, disaster risk reduction (DRR) education, consumer education and development education. All of which can be linked to ESD. Each of these can be interpreted to focus only on the issue that is in its name. So, the figure positions the narrow interpretation of these different educations on the outside periphery. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ferreira, J., Ryan, L. and Tilbury, D. (2006) *Whole-School Approaches to Sustainability: A review of models for professional development in pre-service teacher education*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage and the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES).

<sup>4</sup> S:3, Sustainable School Self-evaluation, Driving school improvement through sustainable development"; Department for schools, children and families, Government of UK, 2008.

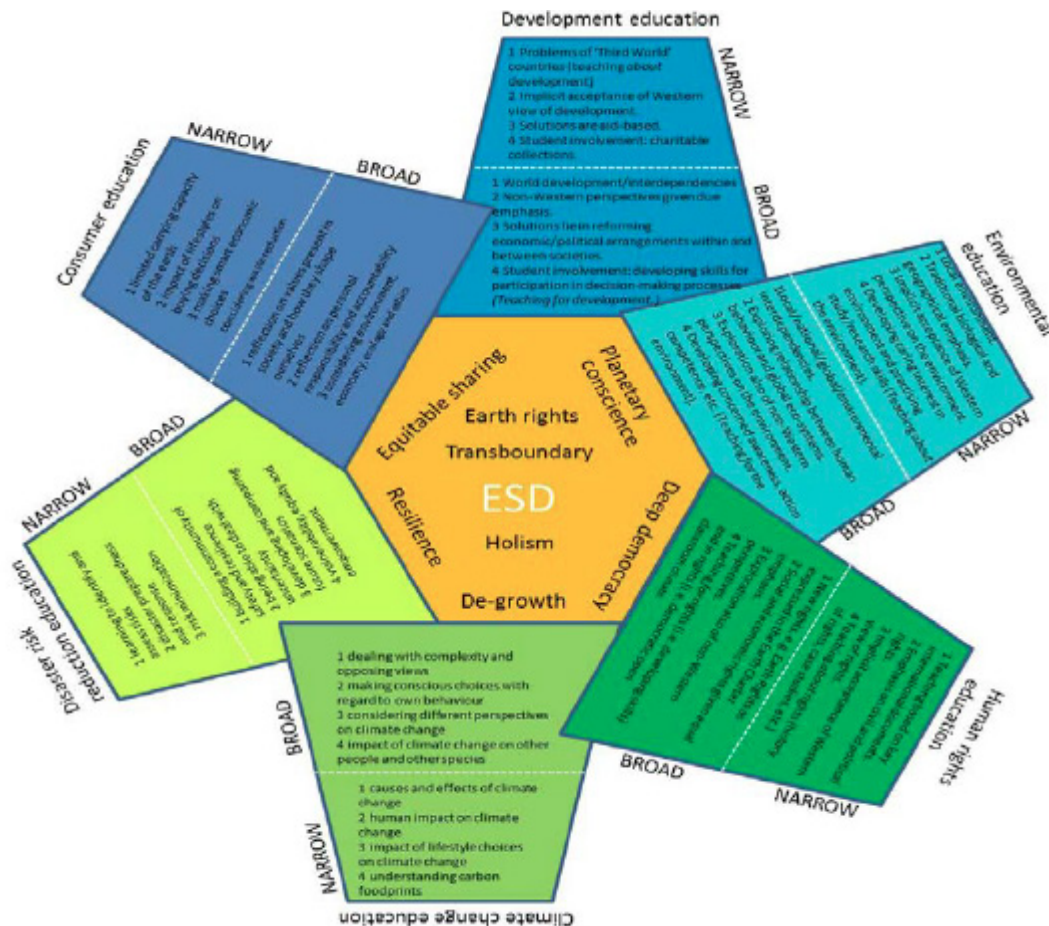


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Figure 1: Positioning deep ESD at the intersection of six ESD-related educations



Source: UNESCO 2012 :Shaping the Education for tomorrow, p. 71.

broader interpretation, however, is positioned towards the centre. Concentrating on these educations more broadly, they revolve around similar issues and overlap at the core, where education for sustainable development is located. However, ESD can only build the centre, when it is interpreted broadly enough to include all listed themes and perspectives. When ESD is interpreted narrowly, it moves back to the figures' periphery, means that it will move from ESD to the specific education issue.<sup>5</sup>

The figure is not set in stone; it could also include other educations like health education, education for democracy or gender education.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO 2012, p. 71.



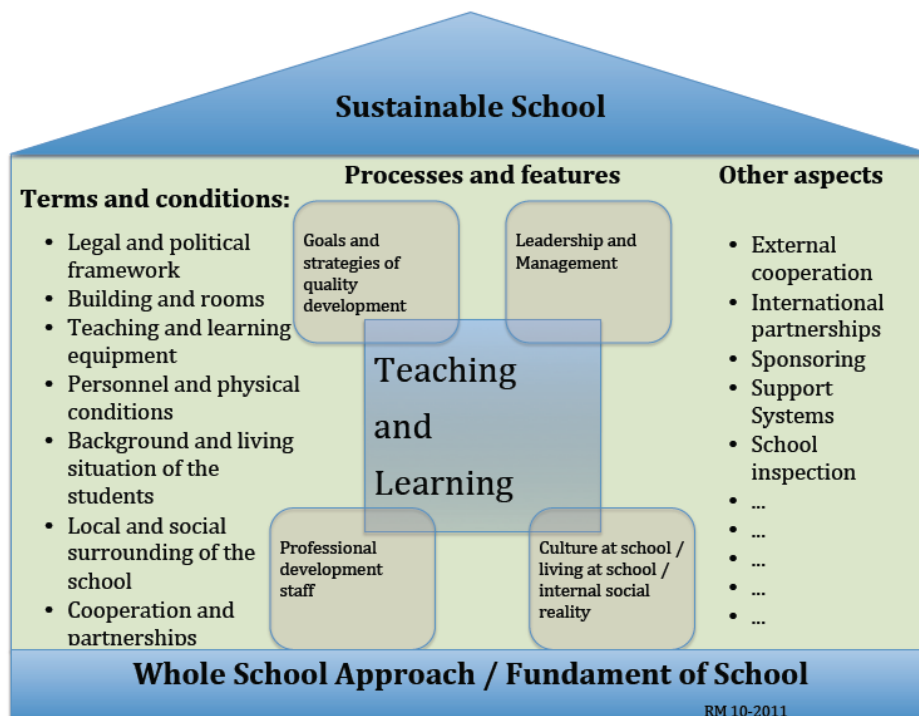
## The Whole School Approach for sustainable development - a concept of education for tomorrow

The ESD Expert Network understands the concept of the Whole School Approach not merely as a given structure to be followed or a concept for a sustainable school in itself, but rather as a platform to evaluate the practice so far, to formulate challenges and possible cooperations, to combine different fields of activities and to develop new fields of activities towards a more sustainable school. The concept follows the experience of the former OECD-based network ENSI (Environment and School Initiatives), which defines ESD as a mainly open concept based on dynamic qualities and competencies: 'A school engaged in ESD is engaged in learning for the future, by inviting students and teachers to enter a culture of complexity, by using critical thinking to explore and challenge, in clarifying values, reflecting on the learning value of taking action and of participation, revising all subjects and the pedagogy in the light of ESD.'<sup>6</sup>

Following these ideas of conceptualizing ESD, the ESD Expert Network developed a model to work on the Whole School Approach on a systematic level. It is based on the different experiences in the four involved countries and has been successfully used at a number of training of trainer seminars (ToT) in these countries.

The model aims to raise and lead discussions at school level on already existing activities in the field of ESD and new ideas and concepts to improve ESD capacities and work on the way to a more sustainable school.

Figure 2: The sustainable school



<sup>6</sup> Breiting, Mayer, Mogensen, Quality criteria for ESD schools, Guidelines to enhance quality of education for sustainable development, Vienna 2005.



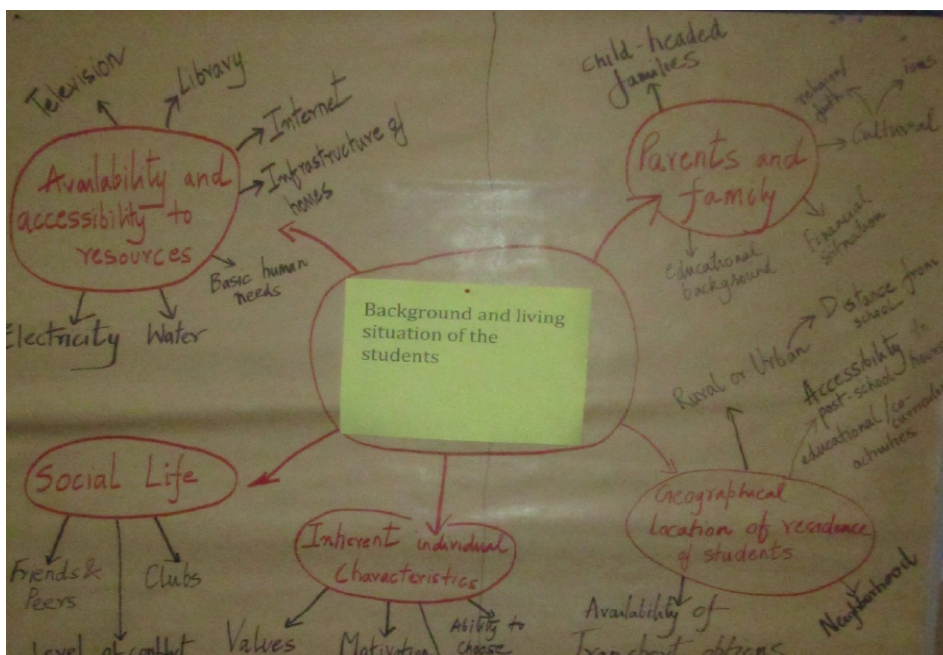
Compared to the UNESCO figure, this model concentrates more on the circumstances in which a school can find itself. Schools are always determined by external factors (*terms and conditions*) and internal factors (*processes and features*) which influence the everyday school life and which need to be considered by educating young people. Other aspects like external cooperation, international partnerships, sponsoring, support systems or school inspection play also a vital role.

The core of a sustainable school builds the teaching and learning which is of course influenced by these factors. Concentrating on the processes and features, leadership and management of a school are critical for the success and the quality of teaching and learning. Closely connected with this is professional staff development as well as all aspects of quality development. The culture at school also plays an important role. Only, if all these aspects are well organised and considered, one precondition for becoming a sustainable school is fulfilled.

Beside these factors, the terms and conditions are less influenceable but the school can react accordingly. The legal and political framework f. ex. is predefined by external facts like the national constitution, the national curriculum and school laws. The quality of teaching and learning depends not merely on the condition of the classrooms but rather on the condition of and for the teaching staff. Are there enough teachers? Are they qualified? And do they have enough and useful teaching and learning materials?

On the students side it is important to evaluate the specific situation of the pupils. How and where do they live? Do they have access to resources? Is the student physically and psychologically prepared for learning? If not, the school has to react and to offer activities to remedy these deficits. And what about the local and social surrounding of the school? Are the students safe, especially girls? Can strangers gain access to the school, are there clean and separated toilets for boys and girls etc..

**Figure 3: Background and living situation of the students**





The Whole School Approach as discussed by the ESD Expert Network examines the whole situation in and around the school. If a school can handle these circumstances and can offer good quality teaching and learning, the Whole School Approach leads to a sustainable school.

Additional to these factors, it is also important to consider how teaching and learning should proceed. A sustainable school should incorporate teaching and learning not only through aspects of the curriculum but also through sustainable school operations as community and parents involvement, long-term planning and monitoring and evaluation. ESD also means active and participatory teaching and learning. There must be an exchange between teachers, pupils, parents and experts from outside the school. They must be engaged in working towards a sustainable school with ESD fully integrated into the curriculum.