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Educating for a sustainable development through social sciences in France: contents / practices / aims

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Since 2004 the French Ministry of Education has prescribed an 'environmental education for a sustainable development' for any school (pre-school, primary school and secondary school whatever the stream)¹. This directive is intended to increase young people's awareness, abilities and responsibilities for the environment and sustainable development. But the official text never qualifies explicitly this education as citizenship education, even if educating citizens is a prevailing aim of school² at any level. In this paper, I question this text and confront it to actual practices and resources. Particularly, I discuss the possibilities to approach 'education for a sustainable development' through history and geography.

I have used as main sources:

- The official educational websites: Ministry of Education, CRDP and CNDP websites (= Centres providing pedagogical and didactical resources for teachers), some websites developed by educational teams developing resources and innovations for teachers ;
- The reports on the experimentation implemented in 10 academies³ in the school year 2003-2004
- Some presentations of projects implemented in schools, available either on educational websites or on the website of the school – selecting only the ones involving explicitly history or geography teachers and/or objectives; this means some 86 projects.

I intended to interview teachers and to visit schools during March and April 2006 but the current events in France (students' strikes and demonstrations) made it very difficult; this will take place only in autumn 2006. But previous enquiries on history and geography teaching on one hand and analysis of the projects listed and reported on the other hand give some reliable indication about difficulties and opportunities.

A new prescription for primary and secondary education in France

'Environmental education for a sustainable development' (EESD) has been introduced in French primary and secondary education as a compulsory content (2004). But the

¹ *circulaire n° 77-300 du 29 août 1977*; Strangely the definition of 'environment' is not referred to a scientific background but to this previous official text !

² Since 2002, 'citizenship education' is as important in primary school as 'mastering the language': both are the main aims of this level.

³ An 'académie' is in France an administrative region specific for education ; they do not always coincide with the Regions.

definitions and the field concerned by 'sustainable development' are numerous and controversial. Even the word sustainable (*soutenable*) is not so common in French: the official wording is '*développement durable*' (long lasting). Which are the options taken by French official prescription?

Which definitions of sustainable development are referred to in the official texts?

The only definition in the decree was a part of Brundtland's: 'A development that satisfies the present needs, without jeopardizing the ability of next generation to satisfy their own needs' but the end of the definition ('with an absolute priority given to the needs of the most deprived people') has been skipped: the explicit solidarity concerns only the next generation and not the present deprived peoples. There was no reference to other existing definitions or to the actual differences and controversies. The aim of the text was not to inform the teachers but to draw a general frame; as usual in French school contents, this frame was set as consensual and sure, whatever the academic or political debates.

In this decree, 'sustainable development' was closely connected with 'environment', defined as 'formed by the physical, chemical, biological features and by the social and economical factors influencing directly or indirectly, on a short or a long term, the human beings and their activities'. This link was expressed in the name allotted to the new issue, 'environmental education for a sustainable development' (*éducation à l'environnement pour un développement durable*). The recent text referred explicitly to a previous one (1977) prescribing the education for environment⁴. It reshaped what has been encouraged during the previous thirty years. Many sentences in this text stressed on 'environmental education'; 'sustainable development' seemed only mentioned as an after thought (e.g. 'In primary school, education for a sustainable development is grounded on knowledge and behaviours learnt through investigation of environmental problems ; the contents [...] provide numerous opportunities to approach questions relating to environment and sustainable development'). Continuity prevailed on change. The teachers involved in environmental education should not be disconcerted and should capitalize on their previous initiatives. Or were the authors themselves confused?

The same text associated environment, economy, society, culture (and, once, values: responsibility and solidarity), echoing thus the three pillars of sustainable development: environment, society, and economy. It underlined also the importance of systemic approaches and of complexity. The text suggested to see EESD as a general frame encompassing other issues prescribed or encouraged before: health, risks, citizenship and concern for development and for 'South'. It did not provide details or rationale for such inclusions or connections. Perhaps it did attempt at some consistency between the previous and actual educational prescriptions, and at encouraging the prosecution of initiatives taken in those frames. Perhaps also the authors had a weak conception of 'sustainable development' and took this concept as a 'hotchpotch'.

⁴ *circulaire n° 77-300 du 29 août 1977*; Strangely the definition of 'environment' is not referred to a scientific background but to this previous official text !

Which explicit and implicit references to citizenship?

The references to 'citizenship' were not really clear in this decree. As said above, it did not present EESD as *a part of* citizenship education or as aiming at citizenship, but as encompassing it partly (Which part? How?). One finds in the text references to the government's commitment towards sustainable development (2003), to the inclusion in the French constitution of a Charter for Environment (2004), but not to the citizens' political choices. The choices and responsibilities mentioned were vague and not qualified as political. One finds references to debates, but only as school practices (including practices in citizenship education). The only mentioned topics (biodiversity, climatic changes, management of the Earth's resources) are not the most political ones. There was no mention of the economic system, of the economic strategies, neither of the North/South relations, nor of the social options which could be related with sustainable development. The main explicit idea was that the students should be able to evaluate the effect of their behaviour on the environment. The education induced seems more behavioural than political.

The text referred explicitly to the global scale, to the global interlinking of human societies, to the responsibility towards Earth, but not to the ethical and political options involved. The sentences were very abstract and general and no specific topic illustrated them. The explicit references to local scale saw it mostly as providing easy and concrete pedagogical supports. One might of course see there an echo of the 'think globally, act locally' motto; but the text did not really encourage action – at least political action: managing one's garbage is OK. Curiously enough the national scale and the European ones were less obvious in the text, when they are the most politically important in France (or because they are?). For example, there was no allusion to law or to current economical and political debates (e.g. On GMO). It might be because the students are not granted as citizens when they are not of age (18) and don't vote. It might be because EESD is supposed to be a moral and behavioural education more than a political one. The projects implemented in school supported this interpretation: 'aiming at citizenship' or 'ecocitizenship' means in fact avoiding waste, sorting and recycling garbage! It might be also to fit with the teachers' precautions. Some of them – and especially the scientific ones – are not used to dealing with political issues... and refuse to indoctrinate the students, especially the youngest ones. I would add that political commitment for sustainable development does not fit very well with the traditional interpretation of politics and political matters in France and probably doesn't fit so well with the liberal options of the present government. The UE encouraged the implementation of ESD, but the French prescription might be a compromise: ESD OK, but nurturing green politics, no.

This resulted in a truncated version of citizenship and of sustainable development: 'opting for sustainable development is a matter of political choices – i.e. choices between different social / economical / cultural plans. Principle 10 of Agenda 21 outlines that environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens; it identifies the right of a citizen to information on environmental issues and to opportunities to participate in the decision making process.' (Mulcahy & Tutiaux-Guillon, 2006)

Which are the official intent and prescription regarding the possibilities to approach 'education for a sustainable development' through social sciences?

EESD is not a new subject and is not included in an existing one, but is referred to by the whole content of primary and secondary school. Each subject can deal with it, and the interdisciplinary projects are most encouraged. Some previous pedagogical arrangements promoting interdisciplinary learning offer opportunities for EESD. Most are based either on optional work on specific issues or on students' project learning. School outings, from a day to several weeks, also provide opportunities. History and geography are often involved in those arrangements and visits.

The mentions of the global/world scale, of 'the different time and space scales' and the quotation of a geographer (P. George) invite implicitly the geography teachers (who in France teach also history and often civics) to take charge in some EESD. The history and geography contents offer a lot of opportunities:

- In Geography, the issues of development and economical growth are recurrent ones in the contents of secondary school; the French and European landscapes are studied in primary school as well as in secondary school, and some World landscapes are studied in secondary school; the environment is an important topic and a key-concept especially in the 5th year of secondary school; the relations between North and South countries are evoked in primary school and in the first years of secondary school and are really studied in the 4th, 5th, 7th years. Case studies prescribed in the 5th and 6th years explore the links between needs and resources, activities, growth, management and effects on the environment, including questions on conflicts. On the last year of secondary school the problems of sustainable development are approached explicitly, as are also studied the debates about globalisation.
- In History, the possibilities are less obvious, but learning about economy and society from the ancient past to the present could induce some reflections on the relations between economy, society and environment. Especially learning about the economical transformations, about the evolution of cities/towns, about the management of poverty and of inequalities is learning about values, behaviours and measures relating to society, economy and environment. These are parts of the contents in primary and in secondary school, as is also the issue of Human Rights. One might also approach when and why, in the 20th century, the issue of development and of sustainability became a political one (4th and 7th year of secondary school).

Those opportunities are sorted on some educational websites. Furthermore the aims of history and geography teaching are consistent with EESD. School history and geography are media to develop tolerance, to contribute to better international and intercultural understanding, to develop European awareness, as well as citizen consciousness. The missions of French school history and geography are: passing on a regional / national / European culture, constitutive of identity but also of political competencies; training social actors, *i.e.* endowing tomorrow's adults with abilities and references for

judgement and action; encouraging citizens to take their responsibilities in a democratic state.

Education for sustainable development, in a broad sense, also includes responsibilities, rights, democratic practices and values, and an understanding of the interdependence between all aspects of our societies. But when the aims for history and geography are prescribed by the Ministry, the ethical and political aims of EESD are implicit or even tacit in the official decree, as said above. I feature here opportunities, not compulsory commitments. Thus it is necessary to look at what is really done in the schools.

Meanings and projects: which current approaches of education for a sustainable development in schools?

Who takes charge?

The answer is not a simple one. On the websites, all the descriptions of the projects are not detailed, the subjects involved are not always indicated and when they are, the consistency between the subjects and the project is not always obvious (why for example involve history and geography in cleaning the school?). Here I don't question the teachers' commitment but the links with academic knowledge. In pre-school and in the 2 first years of primary school, the subjects are not defined as they are for the 3 last years of primary school and for secondary school⁵. I rely on the presentation developed on the sites, but sometimes qualify the data myself. The total number of projects on the website (www.education.eduscol.fr) was 434 in February 2006.

Primary school presented 140 projects (32%); lower secondary school ('*collège*') presented 182 projects (42%) and upper secondary school, including technical and vocational ones ('*lycée*'), 112 (26%). Some schools presented several projects (from 2 to 10!) sometimes connected (for example the *lycée* Vauquelin in Paris presented 10 projects all dealing with the matter of chemical pollution) sometimes really different. Most of the projects coming from *lycées* came actually from technical or vocational ones, especially from *lycées* training for jobs in a specific environment (e.g. Sea) and for chemistry or engineering. Few other *lycées* are involved: the academic tradition probably prevailed on new issues.

Most projects associated several subjects, and in lower secondary school most used the arrangements allowing interdisciplinary work. But the effective part of each subject (knowledge, goals, activities) was not always explicit, whatever the project. A very large majority were directed by science teachers (SVT: '*sciences de la vie et de la terre*'), or these teachers were at least directly involved, especially on topics such as fauna, flora, environment, pollution and water. History was scarce, and mostly linked with the evolution of landscapes or human activities, and sometimes with the issue of Heritage. Geography was more often mentioned, the main topics being landscapes, water needs and resources, local environment, global inequalities and trade (fair trade). I could really connect both with 14% of the projects in primary schools, 21% of the projects in *collèges* and 25% of the projects in *lycées*. These proportions were not so high, regarding

⁵ For example there is no 'history' or 'geography' but 'discovering space and time'.

the opportunities. In the *lycées* the history and geography teachers took advantage of the recent contents, especially for geography, and in *collège* they used the interdisciplinary arrangements.

The descriptions were short, but, clearly, a lot of the projects were only aiming at environmental education, without any obvious contribution from social or economical data. The political aspects were never explicit (and did not exist, in my opinion, for most of them). The word citizenship was scarce and named often projects about cleaning, sorting, recycling (especially in primary schools with sometimes a gap between the name - 'citizens of the world' - and the topic - managing the garbage in the school). 'Citizenship' was also a sort of motto ('we develop citizenship') without clear contents. The environmental projects managed by SVT teachers were generally not aiming at citizenship, even if they planned debating. This is not surprising: even a SVT inspector presented EESD without mentioning the political and ethic deals or alluding to citizenship.⁶

Three types of actions were proposed to the students:

- Cleaning, restoring and improving the immediate environment (the school or the immediate neighbourhood);
- Communicating to others – mostly to their fellow students, but sometimes to other schools – the results of their investigations and reflections: CD Rom, exhibitions, mails;
- Creating some artefacts for people in a deprived country (pumps for water, solar ovens) – this last action very scarce.

Most of the projects deal with local problems or sites; only a few are set in a global perspective; only one involves a European approach (solving ecological problems through the borders). When values are mentioned (and this is scarce) it is mainly 'responsibility' and 'solidarity'. This is consistent with the official frame. But 'sustainable development' seems sometimes more a motto than a key-concept or the heart of the project.

New cloth for old projects and new slogan for anything

Of course a short presentation cannot be wholly reliable or give enough information on what was really done with the students. But reading the presentations, it is clear that some projects would have been developed, sustainable development or not, and that the official encouragement for EESD provided only resources or support.

- Some projects repeated some previous ones (sometimes as old as 1997!), developed in the frame of health education, of concern for development, or of international citizenship. They have only got a new name (not always), a new dressing. Some others were very usual ones, EESD or not: gardening in preschool, going out in woods, exploring a pond, observing the bugs in primary school. I doubt if the specificity of EESD was really evaluated.

⁶ www.ac-guadeloupe.fr

- Some projects were newer but did not seem to be aiming at competencies and reflections specific of EESD: planting trees or restoring a garden in the school, discovering the local Heritage for example.
- Close to 1/3 of the projects, especially for primary school and lower secondary school took charge of the waste and garbage in the school. The main concern was promoting a good behaviour, especially about avoiding and recycling waste. As far as the presentations are reliable, the economical aspects and the type of consumption in our society did not seem discussed. The systemic reasoning and the complexity analysis were not explicitly mentioned as key-approaches. But projects related to garbage are easy to build, are supported by the community and allow the children to act concretely.
- Some projects were a real hotchpotch: each subject sorted a concern or a topic, without any consistency.

A few projects (at least in their description) seemed really innovative and creative. In some academies, nets associated primary and secondary schools, administrations, associations and sometimes scientific. Some schools dealt with acute questions: e.g. In Toulouse⁷, a secondary school focussed a project on industrial risk. These are exceptions.

In fact, environmental education and EESD reach only a minority. The most important factor is the personal commitment of the teachers and of the school authorities. This means that it is not actually realistic to promote EESD as compulsory, or at least that it will need time and training to generalise it.

Empowering the teachers regarding ESD and citizenship

What are the realistic possibilities of guiding and empowering teachers to involve themselves in this education and to connect it with citizenship?

Resources

Deciding to manage a project aiming at EESD needs a strong personal commitment. There is no real coordination between subjects (the contents have not been thought in an interdisciplinary perspective and are not consistent: the corresponding topics are not studied in the same years). No specific time is allotted to this education even if it is compulsory. The work is huge, at least the first years. The experimentations implemented are not transferable: the issue is often a very local one, the environment is specific (few projects deal with urban environment, most focus on rivers, mountains, woods) and sometimes the resources are local or regional only (e.g. The support of a Natural Park or of a local association). The more the projects are ambitious and complex, the less they are transferable. And some remain confidential.

There is a huge amount of booklets, books, CD Roms, videotapes, papers in different revues, pedagogical files... from various authors: associations, militants, teachers,

⁷ This is where the AZF factory exploded on 2002, causing still lasting damage to a lot of dwellings.

administrations, teacher trainers and of course scientists and geographers. Their targets vary: teachers, young people, the general public and university students. Their concern might be local or global; some present examples and some present general approaches, some are theoretical and some very practical... It is very hard for a teacher, especially if s/he is novice in the matter of sustainable development, to find the most reliable and the most relevant books. This is why several educational websites published selected and commented bibliographies. Some of these publications can be consulted in the centres providing pedagogical and didactical resources for teachers. There is a centre in each *département* and a larger one in the *académie*. But the teachers are not used to going in these centres if they live far away. Their own professional documentation often results in hazards and encounters. The possible references (a real maze, but a large choice) contrast with the effective reading (few, the main criteria being accessibility).

There is also a long list of communities, enterprises and associations that propose pedagogical actions. But their action, however professional, is suspected to be too militant or too few connected with the school content.

They are more active in elementary school than in secondary ones.

The key practical questions are:

- How can one empower the teachers to master the difficult issue of 'sustainable development' and to ground their professional reflection on reliable knowledge?
- How can one guide them in the tangle of publications and initiatives? And how can one help them to find the information that they need when they volunteer for developing a project?
- How can one support them in constructing projects that fit in their school, in their social background, in their environment?

The educational authorities and resource centres don't really provide support for developing EESD as citizenship education, and perhaps don't identify it as a need. The recent official report on environmental education (2003) does not investigate the eventual links between this education and citizenship education. The official proposals for in-service training generally don't connect EESD and citizenship except for very few issues (e.g. two proposals: 'citizenship and international solidarity'). In my opinion this is a key-problem. Without this reflection on citizenship the science teachers will perhaps not be keen to enlarge environment to sustainable development, and not aware of the importance of ethics and of values even in environmental education. But as for the social sciences teachers, the history-geography teachers, this lack means that one main link between their subject and the issue of sustainable development is not identified. Thus the relations can only be worked through the contents – and they might miss the educational perspective. Furthermore they will perhaps also miss the reflection about global citizenship.

History and geography teachers' specific needs

EESD introduces some new requirements for students: not only critical thinking, but also systemic reasoning, problem solving, investigation, debates and even debates with

experts, abilities to confront complexity and uncertainty, competences to rationale one's choices and to act consistently. Usually in French school the students don't develop those competences, at least not through history and geography. Usually they extract relevant information in documents, reproduce it, organize it and generally must adhere to what is taught. When they have to solve problems, these are school problems, not vivid ones from the outside world. Even critical thinking is not so much worked out. The new requirements would need new practices, and the new practices would need other professional competencies than the classical abilities to expose clearly the contents and to guide the analysis of documents. How can the teachers develop such professional competences? Which type of teaching/learning for EESD can be easily introduced? Which will support innovative practices and more generally relevant initiatives? This has to be investigated.

The concepts of sustainable development and associated reasoning are not so easily taken charge of by teachers, even if the contents offer a lot of opportunities. Most teachers understand school history and geography as neutral, consensual subjects, providing true facts and reliable school methods, even if, as teachers and citizens, they justify these subjects by asserting civic aims. The controversial and political features of 'sustainable development', the uncertainty about facts, the importance of future in the analysis might prevent history and geography teachers to teach this topic. And they do not know a lot about it, except if they are militant: most teachers are more than 40 years old and have no academic information about sustainable development, except by their own reading.

But the official texts, the educational sites and most pedagogical publications lessen the epistemological problems involved by the concept of sustainable development. This results in didactical difficulties:

- The main paradigm underlying school history and geography is still a positivist one; the paradigms underlying sustainable development are more referred to complexity, to uncertainty and to constructivism; must the whole contents of the subjects be reshaped to fit with new paradigms? Or is it possible for a teacher to support both a positivist approach and a complex constructivist approach? And what about *learning* in such a knowledge context?
- How is it possible *to think* in terms of unsteady systems, of possible branching, to teach about uncertainty, hazard, choices, impossible planning, and *to teach* students to think in the same terms? These types of reasoning might be developed by scientists, but are not so usual for historians and even for geographers... and for teachers. Could the youngest students master this reasoning? Most teachers adhere to a positivist attitude that is here taken aback: the main idea was enlightening the citizen by scientific results as sure and steady truth; if scientific results are unsure, unsteady, *how, what and why* could one teach and learn?
- How is it possible to conciliate aiming at responsibilities, at global awareness and at the same time teaching about the actual world, about wars, about poverty, inequalities, about unavoidable climatic changes, about power? How is it possible to teach about the need for precautionary principles and for planning the future at the same time as teaching about uncertainty and impossible planning? This question

is not only an academic or a didactic one; it questions the understanding of citizenship and the grounds in which the political and civic decisions are rooted.

It is not easy to answer such questions not only on the theoretical side but also on the practical one of teachers training. This also requires investigations.

Conclusion

I have tried in this brief analysis of the present situation in France to point at some efforts and some discrepancies regarding education for a sustainable future:

- There is an official intent to support such an education, and here and there teachers are attempting to implement projects aiming at the environment and for some of them at sustainable development; the educational authorities try to provide information and encouragement for initiatives as do also some teachers trainers;
- At the same time this education is limited:
 - a) Because it is taken in charge only by a few teachers,
 - b) Because the social sciences are not enough involved in the project, which results in a partial conception of what is sustainable development,
 - c) Because there is no general awareness of the educational stakes and especially of the ethical and political ones,
 - d) Because ESD is set in an epistemological and pedagogical frame very different from the one organising most of the subjects are teaching;
- The fundamental links between citizenship education and education for a sustainable development (or even environmental education) are not forged. They might grow at local level, they might be considered on a global scale; but the political key level of State and of Europe seem avoided.
- The teacher training on this issue has just recently begun. It is an on-going process. We have proposed research in this field in the IUFM de Lille. We propose to take into account what is still developed and to experiment innovative practices in the classroom as resources to train teachers. This will be a collaborative research with teacher trainers and primary and secondary teachers. I expect to present some results in the next congress, and then be more optimistic.

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