

Education for Sustainable Development – Spiritual Dimensions
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Proposal

„Spiritual Dimensions of Leadership for Education for Sustainable Development. A Dialogue

In its current program “ESD for 2023”, UNESCO advocates for the transformation of learning and training environments. The “Whole Institution Approach to ESD” emphasizes that learning institutions themselves need to be transformed: “*The entire learning institution needs to be aligned with sustainable development principles*, so that learning content and its pedagogies are reinforced by the way facilities are managed and how decisions are made within the institution. This *Whole Institution Approach to ESD* calls for learning environments where learners learn what they live and live what they learn“ (UNESCO 2020, p. 28).

The transformation of an educational organization and the implementation of sustainability and ESD within the whole institution is a leadership responsibility. As in every other activity of organizational change, it needs the will, the initiative, and the support of the leader, to succeed in such a process.

School effectiveness research, to take one educational field as an example, has produced a large amount of evidence that principals are decisive for the quality and the performance of a school (Leithwood & Jantzi 2008). But despite the importance of the leaders of educational institutions, their role in the implementation of sustainability and ESD has rarely been taken into consideration. Only a few studies have explored the implementation of ESD and how it relates to school organization. Those who did, highlight the importance of the school leader in the process of successfully implementing ESD in a school (e.g. Mogren & Gericke 2017). Based on these results, one can assume that leaders exert a significant influence on ESD in other educational institutions, too.

Sustainability is a leadership issue. When an educational institution aims at integrating sustainability and ESD, the head of the institution plays a pivotal role. She or he must support the endeavor wholeheartedly and credibly, organize a participative process of organizational development, emphasize sustainability and ESD in the daily life, support the teaching staff in the application of ESD, and offer learners opportunities to launch their own initiatives.

It has been argued that the social and environmental challenges that all organizations are currently facing call for new leadership models and methods. In such models, spirituality and ethics play an important role (Fry and Egel 2021). Staff and students ask and observe very closely whether and how the values, expressed in the mission statement, are practiced (Assländer 2016). Leaders can provide information about the meaningfulness of their actions (Broadhurst 2021, p.15f.) and can set an example of sustainable development.

Against this background, the proposed contribution reports on some research on spirituality and leadership for SD/ESD, reflects on how spiritual dimensions can be included into programs that prepare and/or support educational leaders, and inquires what Leadership Development can learn from Religious Pedagogy about spirituality as a topic.

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