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To have or to Be - Reimagining the focus of education for sustainable development

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ABSTRACT

Three decades ago, the term Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) entered educational discourse. However, it is important to note that the concept of 'ESD' did not emerge from scholarly debates on education, rather as a tool to carry forward the agenda of sustainable development. As a result, it has been conceptualized in many different ways. This article is an attempt to further the debate on ESD-conceptualization. The paper discusses connections between constructivism, transformative learning, and Erich Fromm's idea of 'to be' and argues that the focus of ESD needs to change from narrow behavioural outcomes to emancipating learners to ask critical questions, decide (without the influence of anonymous authority of capitalism) and engage in activities that allows them to develop an authentic relationship with their world. The article suggests that consistent opportunities (inside and outside the classroom) to reflect and question the 'having' mode and taking steps towards 'being' mode will address the problem of 'otherness' and contribute towards a more sustainable world.

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Introduction

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become a global educational agenda. This can be particularly witnessed through UNESCO's publications which have clearly focused on promoting ESD (UNESCO, 2005, 2009, 2020). Although ESD has been extensively promoted in the past two decades, statistics on global environmental and socioeconomic conditions (Elhacham et al., 2020, Qian & Fuller, 2020) suggest that ESD has not been able to contribute to the agenda of sustainable development (SD). To contribute towards SD, this paper argues that ESD needs to be re-conceptualized in terms of Fromm's (1976) idea of 'to be'. 'To be' refers to an existence where individuals have authentic relatedness to the world and therefore, they love and care for everything. In contrast, 'to have' mode of existence is about possessing everything as property (Fromm, 1976).

Erich Fromm's (1900–1980) was a critical theorist, social psychologist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst whose educational ideas and criticism of education and educational institutions influenced many people. For example, Ivan Illich's concept of 'deschooling society' and Paulo Freire's 'banking model of education' have their roots in Fromm's thoughts. Paulo Freire in his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* mentioned that 'banking education begins with a false

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understanding of men and women as objects, it cannot promote the development of what Fromm calls 'biophily,' but instead produces its opposite: necrophily' (Freire, 1970, p. 77). 'Biophily' is a tendency to love life while 'necrophily' is a tendency to control life (Fromm, 1964).

Despite being a notable intellectual of the twentieth century, Fromm's work has been relatively less frequently discussed (as compared to the works of other notable philosophers and theorists of the twentieth century) in educational literature. This can be witnessed through keywords search of 'Eric Fromm' OR 'Fromm' in any database of scholarly journals in the field of education. The search produces fewer results. Recently Fromm's work has received attention of the scholars interested in ecopedagogy (Misiaszek, 2022). However, it is important to note that ecopedagogy is mainly rooted in Friere's concept of critical pedagogy (Kahn, 2010). Interestingly, Freire did not explicitly discuss environmental issues in his famous works. On the other hand, Fromm not only discuss the ways capitalism has promoted consumer mind-set which ultimately destroyed relationships (human-human and human-nonhuman), he also discusses how education contributes towards producing consumer mind-set. Fromm (1976) argues that thoughtful educational processes are pivotal in promoting sane consumption and rebuilding relationships with all others (humans and non-humans) to create a new society. In this new society, an individual senses one's 'oneness with all life, hence giving up the aim of conquering nature, subduing it, exploiting it, raping it, destroying it, but trying, rather, to understand and cooperate with nature' (Fromm, 1976, p. 140). Fromm's ideas can provide a framework for educational outcomes and processes.

In the following sections, I first discuss the need of re-imagining ESD. After that a brief discussion on different conceptualizations of ESD, outcomes of ESD, and connection between ESD, transformative learning and constructivism has been presented. Finally, I discuss Fromm's (1976) idea of 'to have or to be' and argue that the focus of ESD should be on emancipating learners to make a shift from 'having' to 'being' mode of existence. The underlying assumption is that the problems of unsustainability are due to our existence in 'having' mode. Foster puts it as: 'the crisis of the earth is not a crisis of Nature but a crisis of society' (Foster 1999, p. 13).

1. Why to re-imagine ESD?

The term ESD was coined at the first UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 in response to a call for sustainable development (SD). To promote ESD, the United Nations declared 2005–2014 as Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) (UNESCO, 2005). It is important to note that the term 'ESD' did not emerge because of scholarly debates on education rather as an idea or a tool to carry forward the agenda of sustainable development (SD). Moreover, the idea of ESD was not developed solely by people from the field of education. Stevenson (2007) highlights that international conferences and intergovernmental meetings brought together people from different backgrounds. Some of them were from the fields of environment or development rather than education. Lack of ties with educational philosophy and theory made ESD a subject of criticism especially from theorists in the field of environmental education (Kopnina & Meijers, 2014; Jickling, 1992).

Although the concept of ESD was introduced 30 years ago, a debate on ESD conceptualization is still relevant because of its centrality in global educational discourse. UNESCO's framework 'ESD for 2030' states that ESD is 'an integral element of the SDG [sustainable development Goal] on quality education and a key enabler of all the other Sustainable Development Goals' (UNESCO, 2020). Pedersen et al. (2022) also argue that despite criticism, ESD is 'a grandiose 'improvement agenda'—not only of education, but of the planetary condition as such. There is an assumption that if we can find the appropriate way of 'doing' ESD, a sustainable world is within reach' (p. 224).

To identify appropriate way of doing ESD, the first step will be to recognize that we are living in the Capitaloscene where capitalism is not an economic system but a situated and

multispecies world-ecology of capital, power, profit and re/production in the web of life (Moore, 2017). Foster (1999) explained the expansion and the influence of capitalism as:

First, capitalism has been so successful over the last few centuries in 'conquering' the earth that the field of operation for its destruction has shifted from a regional to a planetary level. And second, the exploitation of nature has become more and more universalized, because nature's elements, along with the social conditions of human existence, have increasingly been brought within the sphere of the economy and subjected to the same measure, that of profitability (p. 35).

The following statistics further indicate the universal impact of capitalism. NASA's (2023) report shows that the average temperature of earth has increased from 0.67°C to 0.89°C since 2005 (the year when the UN Decade of ESD started). Elhacham et al. (2020) highlight that the total anthropogenic mass, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was 3% of global biomass. However, 120 years later it is exceeding the overall biomass in the world. Moreover, the exponential increase in the rate of anthropogenic mass continued during and after the UN Decade of ESD. Ironically, positive things for non-human entities were witnessed as a spill-over effect of Covid-19. To curtail the spread of Covid-19, many countries had imposed lockdowns. Although lockdowns badly impacted economic activity, greenhouse gas emissions and pollution were considerably lowered due to cancellation of flight operations (Henriques, 2020). Moreover, the lockdowns led to an abundance of birds and insects in the cities because of lesser traffic (Daly, 2020). Amos (2020) reported a visible fall in air pollution in the UK. Although environmental health improved during the pandemic, gender and economic inequalities became more visible during the pandemic (Qian & Fuller, 2020). All these observations indicate a need of fresh debate on ESD.

Although ESD emerged as a hope to address the issues of unsustainability, the aforementioned statistics indicate no real impact of ESD (if it has been implemented globally at all educational levels) as there is a continuous increase in carbon emissions and anthropogenic biomass (Elhacham et al., 2020). Apparently, it seems that either ESD has not been implemented due to hegemonic, capitalist interests or if implemented then ESD has not brought desired results at a large scale. Another reason for the lack of a large-scale positive impact of ESD could be conceptualization of its outcomes. For example, different sustainability outcomes (such as: sustainability competencies, sustainability consciousness, sustainability literacy) focus on enhanced awareness about sustainability issues, and developing pro-sustainability behaviours, values, skills and attitudes (Wiek et al., 2011; Olsson et al., 2016; Stibbe & Luna, 2009). These foci are important but seem inadequate in terms of broader societal change. Sterling (2001) argues that societal change requires transformation in our worldviews. Shephard et al., (2021) noted a correlation between people's critical thinking dispositions (open-mindedness and fair-mindedness) and their environmental concerns. This indicates that if education focuses on developing people's critical thinking dispositions, then it will ultimately make them more pro-environmental. However, Wals (2020) argues that a real change requires more than understanding and criticality. He insists that 'when education only focusses on understanding, awareness and becoming critical, without creating possibilities to act, it can easily become doom-and-gloom education' (p. 826). Similarly, Sass et al (2020) argue that ESD should move beyond raising learners' awareness and developing pro-sustainability values and attitudes and aim at developing people's action-competence. In other words, it is about empowering learners to take informed actions by themselves to impact the wider world. The concept of 'action competence' has roots in environmental education (Jensen and Schnack, 1997; Chawla, 2009).

2. ESD-Conceptualization

Lack of philosophical and theoretical roots provided an opportunity to scholars to interpret the term ESD differently that led to diverse interpretations and conceptualizations of ESD. Öhman

(2004) and Andersson (2017) highlighted three traditions in ESD. They are: 'fact-based, normative and pluralistic' (Andersson, 2017, p. 438). The fact-based tradition views environmental issues as ecological issues and learning about these issues will come from science. The normative tradition views environmental issues as issues of values and suggests a change in people's values and lifestyles to save the natural world. Different from these traditions, the pluralistic tradition sees environmental issues as complex moral and political problems that can be addressed by critical, democratic processes (Andersson, 2017).

In policy documents, ESD has been mostly described under the normative tradition. For example, 'ESD is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre: respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the resources of the planet we inhabit' (UNESCO, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, Bonn Declaration (UNESCO, 2009) says that 'ESD is based on values of justice, equity, tolerance, sufficiency and responsibility'. Kalsoom's (2017) conceptualization of ESD also falls under the normative tradition. She argues that 'ESD is a complex of content and pedagogy that makes students aware of sustainability issues i.e. poverty, environmental degradation, economic and social injustice; and helps them in learning attitudes and behaviours which are democratic, just, and environment friendly' (p. 10–11).

Fien and Tilbury (2002) and Tilbury (2011) conceptualize ESD with socially critical perspective. Tilbury (2011) argues that ESD should help students to 'learn... to ask critical questions; to clarify one's own values; to envision more positive and sustainable futures; to think systemically; to respond through applied learning; and, to explore the dialectic between tradition and innovation' (Tilbury, 2011, p. 8). Sterling (2001) viewed ESD as a vehicle to transform one's worldview. He insists that seeing our worldview rather than seeing with our worldview can make us more open to other views. He concludes that ESD should aim at bringing a paradigm shift in one's worldviews because old paradigms are the roots of unsustainability.

Scholars (such as: Smyth, 1995; Huckle, 1999; McKeown, 2002) view ESD as a progressive move from environmental education by including social and economic dimensions, it received serious criticism as well. Conversely, many scholars have criticized ESD for bringing economy and environment under the same fold. For example, Jickling (1992), Kopnina and Meijers (2014) and Sauvé (1996) argue that economic development is the main cause of ecological unsustainability and a focus on economic development along with environmental and ecological sustainability is unrealistic. They believe that the concept of ESD is anthropocentric and has diluted the spirit of environmental education. However, Stevenson (2007) noted that critics as well as proponents of ESD all agreed (implicitly or explicitly) that with SD emphasising socio-ecological relationships and connections, the discourse of ESD creates a broader and more complex agenda than environmental education

ESD outcomes

Scholars have suggested different outcomes of ESD. Sustainability competencies (Barth et al., 2007; Lozano et al., 2012; Redman et al., 2021), sustainability capabilities (Holdsworth and Thomas, 2021), sustainability literacy (Stibbe & Luna, 2009), sustainability learning (Tilbury, 2011), and sustainability consciousness (Gericke & Torbjörnsson, 2022; Kalsoom et al., 2017) are the commonly mentioned outcomes in ESD literature. These constructs have many overlaps. For example, sustainability literacy, sustainability consciousness and sustainability competencies all include knowledge of environmental, societal and economic issues and their complex relationships. Wiek et al. (2011) described sustainability competencies as 'complexes of knowledge, skills and attitudes' (p. 204). Similarly, sustainability consciousness also encompasses knowledge of sustainability issues (Boeve-de-Pauw et al., 2015). Pro-sustainability attitude is yet another common element.

Critical thinking has been identified as a key educational outcome especially in higher education (Scriven & Paul, 1987; Shephard, 2020). However, it is important to note that it has not

been identified as a key sustainability competence by scholars such as Wiek et al. (2011) and Barth et al. (2007). Moreover, there is relatively lesser focus on the affective dimension of critical thinking that is critical thinking disposition. Shephard (2020) argues that if learners do not develop the affective dispositions to use critical thinking skill, it seems unlikely that they will always think critically especially when the consequences of critical thinking are not very positive towards them. Development of critical thinking disposition is important to exercise critical thinking. Critical thinking disposition predicts people's environmental concerns too (Shephard et al., 2021).

3. 'Having' vs 'being' modes

The main premise of the paper is that unsustainability or unsustainable development is an issue of 'alienation' or 'otherness'. With the rise of capitalism, people's relationships with their world (humans and non-humans) have weakened and they have become 'other'. The paper argues that ESD should address the problem of 'otherness' by helping the learners to make a shift from 'having' mode' to 'being' mode. The following sub-sections discuss Fromm's concepts of 'having' and 'being', educational objectives and processes in 'being' mode, the role of hidden curriculum and how his concepts of learning in 'being' mode resonate with ESD processes and pedagogies. There is also a discussion on hidden curriculum and 'being' mode.

3.1. *Having vs being*

Fromm (1976) argues that under the influence of capitalism, most of us are living in 'having' mode. In this mode of existence, our relationship to the world is of possessing and we consider everything as our property. Fromm (1976) insists that 'the attitude inherent in consumerism is that of swallowing the whole world... Modern consumers may identify themselves by the formula: I am=what I have and what I consume' (p. 23). The 'having' mode of existence makes us vessels that are never full. We keep getting more and more and this reflects in individual consumer behaviours as well as in collective behaviour of the rich nations and groups. Under capitalism (in which the individuals allegedly express their free choice) are managed and manipulated. Whatever we consume, a powerful suggestion apparatus is at work that constantly increase the individual's appetite for new commodities. This appetite of having more and more has turned humans into consumers. This appetite is quite similar to the appetite in alcoholism or in drug addiction (Fromm, 1976).

The 'having' mode also transforms people's self-identity into a thing (Kalsoom & Hasan, 2022). They see themselves as commodity to be in demand without any deep attachment to themselves or to others (Fromm, 1976). Moreover, 'the fear, then, is not of dying, but losing what I have: the fear of losing my body, my ego, my possessions, and my identity; the fear of facing the abyss of non-identity, of "being' lost'" (Fromm 1976, p. 102). The fear of losing makes people to accumulate more and more by alienating from others (humans and non-humans).

Fromm's (1976) concept of 'being' or the form 'to be' refers to two forms. 1) Authentic relatedness to the world - this contrasts with 'having' mode where an individual wants to make everything, everybody (including oneself) as their property. 2) True reality of existence of different entities (humans and non-humans) - instead of their appearance which can be deceptive. Fromm (1976) argues 'if I am who I am and not what I have, nobody can deprive me of or threaten my security and my sense of identity' (p. 90). Thinking and actions of the people who live in 'being' mode are not directed by the anonymous authority of capitalism. They are free to think and act. 'Being' is a process of *becoming* and this mode of existence or living is dynamic and changing.

3.2 'Having' vs 'being' education

Fromm (1976) argues that 'our education generally tries to train people to have knowledge as a possession, by and large commensurate with the amount of property or social prestige they are likely to have in later life' (p. 34). As a result, people memorize information and share with others when needed but do not learn to question ideas. Freire (1970) labelled 'having' mode of education as 'banking method' of education in which 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 1970, p. 58). On the other hand, people who are educated in 'being' mode do not store information in their minds rather they are fully engaged in the learning process, they question things, and take actions. They are genuinely interested in all learning activities. Fromm (1976) explains the Latin roots of the word 'interests' while discussing learning in 'being' mode. In Latin 'inter-esse' means 'to be in [or] among' indicates the active involvement of the learner. Education in 'being' mode allows learners to be fully engaged in the process of learning. True engagement or involvement is an active process and is different from 'busyness' (apparently active but in reality, a passive process). An involved learner does not imbibe the content presented by the teacher rather actively engages with that content, asks questions and challenges assumptions made by authority.

A shift from 'having' to 'being' mode resonates (in some ways) with Mezirow's idea of transformative learning and Kegan's (2009) concept of moving from external to internal authority. Mezirow (1978, 2006) argues that questioning our frames of reference (taken-for-granted assumptions) and transforming those which are not inclusive is transformative learning. Whereas Kegan (2009) argues that transformation is an epistemological journey that involves:

a shift away from being 'made up by' the values and expectations of one's 'surround' (family, friends, community, culture) that get uncritically internalized and with which one becomes identified, toward developing an internal authority that makes choices about these external values and expectations according to one's own self-authored belief system (p. 46).

A similar description of transformative learning was provided by Morrell and O'Connor (2002). They argue:

[TL is] a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of 'being' in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-location: our relationships with other humans and with the natural world (p. xvii).

This view of TL expands the boundaries of transformation from individual level to the societal level and ultimately to the planetary level.

The question here is how to facilitate transformative learning or help students to shift from 'having' to 'being' mode. In Fromm's (1976) view, 'nonalienated activity can be useful in making a shift towards 'being' mode. Fromm makes a distinction between activity and mere busyness in terms of 'alienated' and 'nonalienated' activities. He argues that in alienated activity (busyness) we do not experience ourselves as the acting subjects of the activity; rather, we experience the outcome of our activity. In simple words in 'alienated' activity we do not act rather we are acted upon by external or internal forces. Whereas in 'nonalienated' activity we are the subjects of our activity.

3.3. Constructivism - A process in 'being' mode of education

Fromm's (1976) concept of 'nonalienated' activity echoes with 'constructivism'—a theory of learning which sees learning as an active process of knowledge construction. Constructivists (Piaget, 1957; King, 1993) argue that knowledge cannot be transmitted rather constructed by the learners when they actively engage with the learning materials. In constructivism, learning becomes a matter of restructuring pre-existing modes of thinking rather than accumulating information or facts (Li et al., 2021). There is some criticism on constructivism with reference

to its association with the demands of capitalism. Meyer (2023) argues that since the 'demands of capital changed from needing workers to needing consumers, so the educational industry changed from instructional to constructivist teaching. The former was good at producing workers who were conformist and diligent. The latter is better at producing good consumers (p. 58). Contrary to Meyer (2023) argument that constructivism is a tool to produce good consumers, this paper argues that constructivism can provide opportunities for authentic engagement in activities and lead to a shift to 'being mode' of existence. The basic principles of constructivism are invention, self-organization, reflection and dialogue (Fosnot, 2005). These principles are in line with Fromm's concept of 'nonalienated' activity. Fosnot and Perry (1996) argue that learning requires invention and self-organization on the part of the learner. Teachers should encourage students to raise questions, generate hypotheses and models, test them, and discuss them in communities of discourse and practice. In addition, teachers should allow reflection time, for example through journal writing, or collective reflection. The classroom should be a community of discourse engaged in reflection and dialogue (Fosnot & Perry, 1996).

Kaloom et al. (2022) used collective reflection in a teacher preparation programme and found that preservice teachers' engagement in collective reflection ultimately transformed their environmental practices (sayings, doings and relatings). Cammarota and Romero's (2009) noticed a transformation in the epistemological beliefs of the secondary school students who were engaged in community-based research projects. However, it is important to note that in both cases (Kaloom et al., 2022; Cammarota & Romero's, 2009) the learning content focused on real-world issues. It can be claimed that constructivism can serve as a 'being' mode of educational process if learners are engaged in 'nonalienated' activities focusing on real-world issues.

Wals (2020) idea of education to address the issues of unsustainability is also aligned to Fromm's (1976) idea of 'nonalienated' activity. Wals (2020) argues that the foremost thing in helping students to address the challenges of unsustainability is 'to establish a pedagogy that is critical, emancipatory and relational' (p. 825). He further explains that the criticality of the pedagogy refers to giving space to students to ask bold and disruptive questions about why things are the way they are, how can they be changed and what prevents them from changing. In such a pedagogy, students are the subjects, and they exercise their agency. Similarly, the emancipatory element in the pedagogy (about young people's voice in the matters of concern and identifying ways to address them continuously) also views learners as subjects. The relational element is again in line with Fromm's (1976) idea of activity in which learners are not passive objects rather active subjects who develop a relationship of mutuality and co-operation with their world (humans and non-humans).

3.4. Hidden curriculum for 'being' mode

Another consideration regarding 'how to help learners shift from 'having' to 'being' mode is the overall ethos of the institution. Based on his extensive observations as a social psychologist, Fromm's (1976) inferred that overall social structure or wider norms and values are the key determinant in developing individuals' tendencies of 'to have' (to possess) or 'to be' (to share, to give). If a culture fosters the greed for possession, individuals are more likely to develop 'having' mode of existence whereas if the culture fosters 'being' and sharing then individuals will more likely develop the tendency of 'to be'. Like the wider societal culture, institutional culture also impacts learners' tendencies. The overall culture or ethos of the institution serves as a hidden curriculum to promote either 'to have' or 'to be' tendencies among individuals. Hidden curriculum refers to the set of learning contexts and actions of the peers, teachers and others in an institution which shape individuals' learning but are not part of official programme of study (Bray et al., 2018). Literature (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Baykut et al., 2022) shows that hidden curriculum shape and influence students' educational experiences. Wals (2020) highlights the impact of hidden curriculum of unsustainability as: 'when there is a disconnect between

what a school does and what it tries to teach in these areas, there is a hidden curriculum of unsustainability at work that can do more harm than good' (p. 826). In other words, if the hidden curriculum promotes 'to have' tendencies then including ESD in the formal curriculum will not be able to promote 'to be' tendencies. ESD (in classroom or outside the classroom) should apply co-emergence, participation, and intrinsic valuing as pedagogical tools to rediscover and re-establish our sacred bond to the world (Bai, 2001).

4. Conclusion

Before presenting the conclusion, it is ascertained that Fromm's idea of 'to be' is not a recipe for the reconceptualization of ESD. It is a broader framework that can be used to identify ESD outcomes and processes. The conclusion presented here is not inclusive regarding knowledge aspect of ESD.

Rooted in Fromm's thought that 'having' mode of existence stops people to develop an authentic relationship with themselves or with other humans or non-humans, it is argued that the purpose of ESD should be to address the issue of 'otherness' or 'alienation'. Learners need to take ontological journey of moving from 'having' to 'being' mode and rebuild relationship with their world. The focus of ESD needs to change from achieving narrow behavioural outcomes to emancipating the learners to ask critical questions, decide (without the influence of anonymous authority of capitalism) and take thoughtful actions to build authentic relationships with their world. Like many other conceptualizations, viewing ESD in terms of its focus to help learners to shift from 'having' to 'being' mode would appear vague and a lofty ideal to many. However, I argue that this re-imagination of ESD is neither vague nor unachievable ideal. With consistent opportunities (inside and outside the classroom) to reflect and question the 'having' mode and taking steps towards 'being' mode will address the issue of 'otherness' and contribute towards a more sustainable world. Like any complex learning, emancipation or moving to 'being' mode of existence will not be instantaneous. In Fromm's (1976) words, it does not mean big differences in appearance like in earth and sky. The change from 'having' to 'being' is a tipping of the scales where one step in the new direction will be followed by the next and each right step will contribute.

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