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Neoliberalism and justice in education for sustainable development: a call for inclusive pluralism

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Commonly conceived, sustainable development is concerned with social and economic equity and maintenance of ecological stability for future generations. The Brundtland Report addresses the ethical principles of intragenerational and intergenerational equity as fundamental pillars of sustainable development. This equity is often defined in economic terms, involving fair distribution of natural resources, and in practice dependent on the workings of a neoliberal market economy. Simultaneously, it is assumed that democratic learning enables students to be critically rational and ethical agents able to make informed choices in regard to sustainability challenges. This article questions whether the benefits of sustainable development should be meant for humans only, and whether concern for environmental sustainability should be limited to the environment's ability to accommodate social and economic equity. It is argued that the dominant form of pluralism employed within education is essentially anthropocentric, prioritizing social justice over interests of more-than-humans. This article will argue for a bolder move in the direction of *inclusive pluralism* through eco-representation and reinstatement of education *for* nature.

Keywords: education for sustainable development (ESD); inclusive pluralism; neoliberalism

Introduction

Ethical principles of intragenerational equity (spatial equity within a generation) and intergenerational equity (temporal equity between generations) are the central principles of sustainable development (Sund, [forthcoming](#)). This equity is often defined in economic terms, meaning fair distribution of natural resources. Plural perspectives are encouraged in order to engage broader participation in the enterprise of sustainable development (UNESCO 2015). Concern for democracy and participation is also crucial to the current practice of Education for Sustainable Development or ESD (Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012; Sund, [forthcoming](#)). ESD emphasizes the need to reflect on the implicit normativity of education in favor of more plural ethical approaches (e.g. Öhman and Östman 2008; Payne 2010a; Kronlid and Öhman 2013) in order to avoid preaching pre-determined values (e.g. Wals 2010).¹ Citizenship education aims to prepare students to become knowledgeable individuals committed to active participation in a pluralist society (Jickling 1994, 2005, 2009, 2013; Sears,

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Clarke, and Hughes 1998). While citizens have different and conflicting viewpoints on political, moral and religious matters, it is often assumed that in essence these citizens are rational and essentially ethical decision-makers (Bansel 2007). Following from this, it is assumed that sustainability can be achieved by economic and technological development (Lidskog and Elander 2012) and that democratic processes can advance environmental agendas (Koukouvelis 2012). These assumptions are often counted on in order to find a common consensus on sustainability; one that is acceptable to the majority of citizens regardless of their different viewpoints (Atkinson and Wade 2014).

Pluralism, an intellectual and ethical position that ideally allows for the democratic exchange of ideas, is associated with the notion of active citizenship. While pluralism can be discussed from many different ideological standpoints including liberalism, communitarianism, pragmatism, and deliberative democracy (e.g. Norton 1987; Cuomo 1998; Cherniak 2012; Kronlid and Öhman 2013), in this article we focus on moral pluralism in an educational context. Pluralism encourages active participation and open views rather than teaching consensus (Jickling 1994, 2005, 2009; Wals 2010; Peters and Wals 2013). As a cumulative theory for the participatory and democratic mission of EE/ESD, pluralism often disputes a single vision of (or path to) sustainability, presenting instrumentalism in education *for* sustainability as a 'strait-jacket' on democracy (Saward 1998). Within this vision, instrumental or expert education is seen to undermine students' ability to take responsibility as democratic citizens (Sund 2008; Læssøe and Öhman 2010; Wals 2010).

Countering this, others have doubted whether an open pluralistic space alone will enhance individuals' competences to act on behalf of the environment (RICKINSON 2003; Smith 2003; Chawla and Cushing 2007; Kopnina 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015). As Washington (2015, 370) has pointed out, pluralism as it is currently conceived is grossly inadequate for environmental protection. When it comes to *specific solutions* to sustainability, especially in cases that require scientifically informed or committed decisions, public morality and rationality is highly questionable (MacIntyre 1988; Lidskog and Elander 2010; Atkinson and Wade 2014).

Should we allow a plurality of opinions on the problems and causes of unsustainability or promote a more instrumental approach teaching – and even advocating – one course of action over the other? Should we teach *for* sustainability, and what type of sustainability – social, economic, ecological, or all of them concurrently? In this article we discuss why we should not readily abandon goal-oriented, instrumental, and expertly informed education. We aim to critically examine the type of relativistic pluralism that makes it difficult to defend a commitment to any particular moral or political standpoint as it assumes that there are no uncontested universal standards by which we may evaluate competing moral views (Rawls 2005). Our objection is to relativistic pluralism that pretends to be open to all views but presents only one dominant perspective and leads the discussion away from the key drivers of unsustainability and away from pro-environmental advocacy.

We shall refer to relativistic pluralism as an assumption that there are many different visions, approaches and pathways in approaching sustainability. When referring to pro-environmental advocacy, we shall engage environmental ethics, described, variously, as ecocentrism, deep ecology, or dark green ecology (e.g. Naess 1973; Callicott 1980, 1999; Rolston 2015). These various strands of ethics remove humans from the moral pedestal and are united against anthropocentrism,

which regards all parts of the natural world as exploitable for our benefit (Garner 2015.²) Both animal liberationist and deep ecology philosophies take a stance towards protecting species, ecological niches, and biodiversity (Bekoff 2013, 34).

In this article we will examine different conceptions of pluralism while exposing the anthropocentric democracy buried within. Furthermore, we examine the implication of an ethical pluralism, in research, educational practice and curriculum, referring to the purposes, tasks and scope of educational activities. We take a clear stance toward *both* human and more-than-human interests, breaking of the boundary between humans' and nonhumans' moral concerns, and call for inclusive pluralism.

Discussing climate change and extinctions

Climate change and extinctions are two of the many complex moral dilemmas that students and educators face in the context of broader environmental unsustainability. Kronlid and Öhman (2013, 21) reflect that due to climate change it is estimated that 150–200 million people will be displaced and 30% of all species run the risk of being extinct by 2050. They reflect that a 'climate change ethic' involves both anthropocentric and an ecocentric concern, as it affects biodiversity as well as human welfare. Kronlid and Öhman admit that intergenerational anthropocentrism is presently a common ethical position in the climate change discourse and energy policy discussions (ibid, 25). They note that the issue of climate change raises ethical questions, concluding that the 'cross-disciplinary work should take the complexity and pluralism of environmental ethical issues and the variety of sub-positions produced above into consideration' (ibid, 34).

This raises a number of ethical questions: Should educators contribute to student learning about climate change and biodiversity loss, or merely expose different views about these issues? Should they teach scientific facts about the rate and specific types of extinctions? Should they teach about the factors that cause these extinctions, such as expansion of human population and consumption? Should they explore uncomfortable ethical conjunctions between the noble task of promoting human health and fair distribution of economic benefits, and the consequent increase in global resource depletion? Considering that many nations owe their wealth to the natural resource exploitation and the use of fossil fuels, would it be morally fair to discourage developing countries from increasing their greenhouse gas emissions and exploitation of resources (Lidskog and Elander 2010)? Is the primacy of economic development objectives a heritage of increasingly globalized neoliberal values and should we as educators and researchers be supporting these values?

Pluralism and education

One of the concerns of educators is the indoctrination into neoliberal values, shaped by the dominant ideology of economic growth as a prerequisite of social development (Davies and Bansel 2007). Here is the point where supporters of pluralism in education branch out into those who promote openness of opinions as a panacea for neoliberal ideology, and those that are skeptical of *all* ideologies, including that of education *for* sustainability.

Those skeptical of all education *for* specified ends generally support educational practice in which conflicts are not dealt in moral or rational terms (Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012, 548). This school's ethical underpinning can be characterized

by pragmatist environmental ethics arguing that the intrinsic value of nature has little practical value. Pragmatists assume that most people will care for the environment because of self-interest, and because people are limited by their own perceptions (Norton 1987; Light 1996; Hui 2014). Indeed, many of the early efforts to extend moral consideration to more-than-humans attempted to build up a larger, trans-human moral order by relying on the extension of ethical principles that underpin human social emancipatory movements (Weston 1992). In this sense, environmental ethics is indebted to the anthropocentric ethic. According to Weston (1992), the project of going beyond anthropocentrism still ‘looks wild, incautious, intellectually overexcited’, (143) because the ethic embracing environmental or animal liberation is still in its infancy. In order for the ecocentrism to secure a foothold in dominant cultural understandings, we need to open up possibilities for new connections – something that the pragmatic and pluralist quest for development of critical thinking strives toward. Pluralism corresponds to an educational position that argues for breadth and depth of epistemological and increasingly ontological possibilities to provide context, background, and ideas that can enable new possibilities (e.g. Öhman 2006; Bengtsson and Östman 2013). This conception may also include the space to introduce the voices of the more-than-humans. Thus at first glance, pragmatism and social pluralism can be seen as allies of ecocentrism (Eckersley 2005, 367). But only at the first glance.

Non-anthropocentric ethics

Since sustainable development’s many formulations are ‘open’ for interpretation (Weston 1992), it remains questionable how environment can be protected given the Brundtland’s central tenants (Rolston 2015). Washington (2015) has pointed out that the present academic commitment to pluralism leads to an aversion to specific solutions in favor of endless deliberation. Meanwhile, ecological justice is rarely served through ‘convergence theory’ (Norton 1984) as social justice usually involves the distribution of natural resources, and *not* the rights of species or habitats that constitute these ‘resources’ (Crist 2012). Anthropocentrism can only make a positive contribution to the environment in situations where both humans and more-than-humans are negatively affected, as in the case of water pollution (Katz 1999). While climate change and species extinctions have some negative effects on humanity (e.g. climate change can endanger economic development because of extreme weather conditions; and the loss of biodiversity can have a negative effect on food chains or the pharmaceutical industry) they have an *existential* effect upon more-than-humans. If technological substitutes for ‘natural resources’ or ‘ecosystems services’ are found, the disappearance of the ‘useless’ species may remain unnoticed. Additionally, concerns about limits to growth are often relayed through their potential limits to *human* development, precluding radical solutions that might be necessary to resolve these problems (Kopnina 2012a, 2013a, 2014a, 2014b).

From this, ecocentric scholars have concluded that anthropocentrically motivated protection of nature is insufficient and moral ecocentrism and acknowledgment of intrinsic value of nonhumans is necessary (e.g. Katz 1999; Eckersley 2005; Rolston 2015). The notion of intrinsic value implies that more-than-human species matter – that they are ‘worthy, they have their own forms of agency, and they are valuable above and beyond their use value to humans’ (Eckersley 2005, 366). Thus, in demo-

cratic societies, and more pointedly in education, nature advocates cannot afford to surrender to the easier argumentative route of anthropocentric pluralism.

Advocacy, pluralism and education

The widespread acknowledgement that there are no uncontested universal standards by which we may evaluate competing moral views means that pluralistic discussions are free of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ (Rawls 2005). Positions can be defended, but none are *better* or *right*. Since pluralist supporters are not searching for consensus, but rather ‘mutual understanding’, a ‘truth’ is not necessary.

Ironically, twenty-first century society generally tends to regard social equity and personal liberty as ‘truth’. This necessitates a universally and objectively defined ‘good’ such as ‘human welfare’ or ‘non-discrimination’ for these values to carry moral weight. Since this is impossible, powerful hegemonies (World Bank and United Nations, for example) and the will of the majority (perceived public desire) act as truth-givers. Neither of these groups include more-than-humans, and presently human eco-advocates and animal liberationists are considered radical and rarely supported by the wider society (Kahn 2010).

Since education is most often restricted by the society and its beliefs, the spaces in academia for contestation of anthropocentric pluralism are also limited. In this sense, pluralistic education is not aim-free, as it allows for advocacy of social and economic equity and subordinates the rest. Teaching an equity³ which includes more-than-humans will have to take specific species’ needs into account. This is a daunting task, since at present consideration of *any* animal’s or plant’s rights (let alone natural resource access rights) is not part of political agendas (e.g. Crist 2012). Likewise there is a lack of political or public interest in the advancement of animal rights, as well as distributive justice between species (Kopnina and Gjerris 2015). However, while education is heavily influenced by the greater societal pressures around it, we believe it is still the catalyst through which radical inclusive pluralism can further ecological justice and environmental sustainability. Pluralism as a tool and a model for communication *can* be utilized for moving towards established goals – rising above its relativistic tendencies in the process – only if it is truly radicalized.

Radical alternatives: positioning advocacy in education

A pluralistic approach has at its core the conviction that it is wrong to persuade people to adopt pre- and expert-determined ways of thinking and acting (Wals 2010). This renders the deep ecology perspective (Naess 1973) as only one of many perspectives, not a unique position allowing for *inclusive* pluralism. To revisit George Orwell, in current pluralism, some animals are more equal than others. Despite the proclaimed range of pluralist perspectives, an anthropocentric attitude towards the environment manifests itself as a generally shared consensus in sustainable development discourse and ESD.

The absence of more-than-humans in democratic debates can be reversed through eco-advocacy as part of the democratic task of nature advocacy (Eckersley 2005). Concern for environmental sustainability is limited to the environment’s ability to accommodate intragenerational and intergenerational equity (Catton and Dunlap 1978). While it is assumed that intragenerational and intergenerational equity is

universally good, the significance of animal rights and deep ecology in education is easily subverted, with ‘critical thinking’ remaining within the constraints of the anthropocentric box (e.g. Kopnina 2014d).

The critical pedagogical theorists primarily speak of the specific context of *dominant* approaches (McLaren 1998). This opens up an understanding of pluralism that does not merely represent variations on the dominant approach, but enables the critique of the anthropocentric discourse while identifying *subordinate* inclusive pluralism, allowing us to find common ground with other ‘subordinates’. Cuomo (1998) links the oppression of women, people of colour, and other subjugated groups to the degradation of nature, and states that it would be equally immoral not to consider more-than-humans.

The problem with the task of expanding the realm of justice to embrace radical and deep ecology in ESD lies in bringing a radical reconceptualization of the meaning of pluralism: where humans have less power but more responsibility. The magnitude of this challenge becomes clear once we deconstruct what has made the anthropocentric pluralism dominant. While the dominant neoliberal pluralism allows for competing forms of practical rationality and their attendant ideas of justice, these ideas are in turn the result of socially embodied traditions and dominant ideologies (MacIntyre 1988; McLaren 1998). In practice pluralism is often reflective of the internalized neoliberal model of the ‘good’ citizen – personally responsible, participatory, and social justice oriented – that underscores education for democracy. Yet, citizenship ‘embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects not arbitrary choices but, rather, political choices with political consequences’ (Wesheimer and Kahne 2004, 269). In this context, the choices are often intertwined with free market thinking, prioritizing economic growth at the expense of ecological concerns (Bansel 2007; Davies and Bansel 2007).

Moreover, educational institutions themselves have come to reflect the structures and agendas of private, capital-driven organizations (Ball 2003), emphasizing self-evaluation, coinciding with the quantifying and commodification of information (Lyotard 1984). Neo-liberal perspectives on education tend to prioritize economic interests, keeping environment ‘in orbit’ of economic development (Rolston 2015) while simultaneously attempting to create a kind of ‘democratic’ space that encourages support of neoliberalism. Thus, given the pervasiveness of the market economy ideology in our social structures and its democratic incorporation, it has formed the dominant pluralism (McLaren 1998). Furthermore, as pluralistic approaches often necessitate a decentralization of power from the teacher, principal or administrator, the empowered participants begin to police themselves, and the market-driven forces initiating this power-shift become hidden (Anderson 1998).

However, as Blewitt (2013) has commented, dissenting academics can still be progenitors of alternatives, if they are courageous enough to act (62). One of the authors has come to the same conclusion analyzing student learning when exposing alternatives to neoliberalism in the context of business education (Kopnina 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

Neoliberal plural approaches are heavily influenced by an ideology of market choices and anthropocentric bias found in much of social science (Catton and Dunlap 1978; Crist 2012; Crist and Kopnina 2014; Rolston 2015). While educators think that students are given choices, the choices are only between different shades of anthropocentrism instead of *radical non-anthropocentric* perspectives. These perspectives include animal rights (e.g. Singer 1975; Sagoff 1988; Taylor 2008, 2010),

and existing cases of legislative frameworks that protect nonhumans. These cases address rights of concrete species, such as endangered species or dolphins (*Telegraph* 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/9093407/Dolphins-should-be-recognised-as-more-than-human-persons.html>), or even ‘natural objects’ (Stone 1974) that can be legally represented akin to claims made on behalf of children or corporations. Notwithstanding certain differences in perspective,⁴ the unifying element of non-anthropocentric ethics is their shared concern for more-than-human elements of nature – be they individual animals, or entire habitats (Bekoff 2013; Kopnina 2013c; Garner 2015).

Without imbuing an ecological purpose to education, an unrestrained confusion of plural anthropocentric perspectives will continue to de-politicize and re-radicalize education. Thus, rather than doing away with anthropocentrism-ecocentrism dichotomy, as Öhman and Östman (2008) propose, we support explicit ecocentric advocacy in order to counter the injustices inflicted upon the natural world.

The hidden assumptions and explicit alternatives

As noted in the introduction, concerns over social and economic justice by far outweigh ecological justice within sustainable development discourse (e.g. WCED 1987; UNESCO 2015). As Strang (2013) has reflected, there remains a thorny question as to whether anyone, advantaged or disadvantaged, has the right to prioritise their own interests to the extent that those of the more-than-human are deemed expendable. If the result of attaining social justice is only a short-term gain at the long-term expense of the more-than-human, this is in itself not a sustainable process for maintaining either social or environmental equity. Thus, there is a need to expand the realm of justice to address anthropocentrism in education (Fawcett, Bell, and Russell 2002; Bekoff 2013).

Many of these educational paths incorporate the earth democracy (Shiva 2005) or eco-advocates who ‘speak for nature’ (O’Neill 2006), representing the voices of more-than-human citizens (e.g. Sandell and Öhman 2010). It is the creation of these ‘voices’ that are essential. In *Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram (1997) speaks of the kinds of first-hand experiences that could enable students to attend to the more-than-human voices including explorations of animal tracks, the speech of stones and the taste of the wind, felt through direct contact or storytelling. Similarly, Payne (2010b) calls for storytelling, art, illustration, song and poetry to place learners within an ecocentric sense of self. This sense of self comes from an appreciation of the intrinsic value of nature, and in Abram’s words ‘through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us’ (1996, 69). Evoking Abram, Bonnett (2015, 25) reflects that while the mutually sustaining relationship with the transcendent that lies at the heart of human consciousness is frequently veiled and distorted by other powerful motives, this interdependent relationship with nature still has an essential ontological significance. In education, ‘sustainability is not a matter of alien material to be manipulated and problems to be fixed, but of opportunities for loving partnership and engagement – where ‘loving’ means recognition of the existence of something that is other than ourselves and our constructions, and allowing it to stand forth in the nobility of being itself’ (ibid., 38).

As Pashby and Andreotti (forthcoming) suggest, we need to ‘work towards intelligibility, dissent, and solidarity: making visible and unearthing the embedded

assumptions at the core of systems of oppression; resisting their enactments and reproductions; and coming together through difference'. In this process of recognizing difference, further progress can be gained by using cross-cultural examples of Non-Western environmental learning, as it is closer to the deep ecology perspective (Milton 2002; Black 2010). Indigenous ontologies have historically disputed a dualistic vision of human-environment that produces separate 'social' and 'environment' categories, and demonstrated that sustainability can only be achieved by the provision of simultaneous social and ecological justice (e.g. Shiva 2005; Strang 2013). The environment as a natural resource in modern neo-liberal societies stands in sharp contrast to the ecological spirituality of traditional cultures (Taylor 2008, 2010; Sponsel 2016).

Moving on: reflection on strategy

In the dominant paradigm, environmental advocacy and animal liberation are viewed as lesser *subcultures* which threaten the mainstream neoliberal education (Eckersley 2005; Bekoff 2013). The fear of eco-totalitarianism (Wals and Jickling 2002, 225) diverts attention from the single-species' totalitarianism, which denies a 'voice' to the millions of species (O'Neill 2006) in education and beyond. An anthropocentric pluralism's artificial perch offers the illusion of superiority and a transient experience of 'wealth' at the expense of others (Crist and Kopnina 2014). Thus, we support Sund (*forthcoming*) in her call for the 'democratic mission of an education that involves diverse interest groups, supports free opinion-making and enhances students' competences to act'. There is indeed an urgent need to engage in 'emancipatory' education enabling 'alternative ways of thinking, valuing and doing' (Wals and Jickling 2002, 225) but doing so in a radically different way, impossible without complementary societal change.

It is very difficult to imagine a truly inclusive pluralism having a lasting impact if students do not find a fertile and welcoming context beyond the classroom. The *normative contextualist* claims that the epistemological justification for any new ideas or beliefs introduced to a group is dependent on the norms, practices, and beliefs already operating within the group and its subgroups (Timmons 1996). This is analogous to the chicken and the egg: does the context define the education, or can the education redefine the context? First we must work on the 'what', and then the 'how'.

To begin with the 'what', Kahn (2010) explores the means to move education toward a more passionate and compassionate involvement with the environment, moving beyond the amorphous bounds of relativism towards a radical change in our way of viewing our role on this planet. This change involves exposing students to education *for* deep ecology and experiential education (e.g. LaChapelle 1991), *for* outdoor environmental education (e.g. Sandell and Öhman 2010), *for* ecological justice (Glasser 2004), *for* animal rights (Gorski 2009); conservation education (Norris and Jacobson 1998), and post-humanist education (Bonnett 2015). As a starting point, such education can serve as a 'gesture of planetary modesty and a badly needed exercise of restraint on the part of a species notorious for its excess' (Nash 2012, 304). Radical democracy and inclusive pluralism can be integrated as subjects within EE/ESD and education in general. In this context, Bekoff (2013) has called different educational 'camps' to combine their knowledge in unified ecocentric and animal liberation ethics, and not to get confused in a flurry of 'niche' groups.

In relation to the ‘how’ of educational change, we need to note that thinking out of the box will not require a break with democratic or plural tradition, but an *extension* (Eckersley 2005). In the words of Eckersley (2005, 377), the response is not to forsake democracy for environmental justice, but rather to ‘radicalize democracy in order to achieve environmental justice’. Ecocentrism as a large umbrella that unifies different ethics that respect ecosystems, species, and individuals within species can actually expand the bounds of existing democracy to embrace the truly inclusive pluralism (*ibid.*, 377).

If we assume there is nothing about democracy that guarantees decisions favoring sustainability (Lidskog and Elander 2010), this brings into question the type of ‘good’ that democratic or citizenship education promotes. The hegemony of neoliberal capitalism creates an ideology in which raising an issue of extinction or of animal subordination in the industrial food production system becomes a marginal position (Crist 2012; Wyckoff 2014). Removing the politically uncomfortable questions about the expansion of human population and consumption and focusing on intergenerational justice in distribution of resources makes the quest for ecological justice futile (Kopnina 2012b). This type of placated or amorphous pluralism stands in sharp contrast to education *for* sustainability (e.g. Kahn 2010; Nikolopoulou, Abraham, and Mirbagheri 2010; Kopnina 2012a). An affirmative action program based on an eco-advocacy approach is needed to ensure that the environment does not get lost in EE and ESD. Questioning anthropocentric pluralism is far more than an academic exercise of debating the placement of humans at the center of material and ethical concerns. It is a fertile way of shifting the focus of attention away from the symptoms of our unhealthy planet to the investigation of root causes.

Conclusions

We have argued that the pluralism which currently dominates ESD is often entangled with notions of economic development prioritizing social justice over interests of more-than-humans. Education must approach this consciously by utilizing an inclusive pluralism that supports eco-representation. This challenge reaches out beyond sustainability education, toward all educators. In order to move our concerns out of the niche field of EE and ESD, education for sustainability needs to be integrated in existing pedagogical standards. Not only must students attempt to counter the neoliberal and anthropomorphic bias in pluralistic spaces, they need to recognize ‘the limitations and fallibility of their own perspectives and judgments’ (Smith 2003, 59). Such enlightenment does not come easy, or guaranteed. Taking inspiration from Saward (1998): a purely eco-inclusive pluralism devoid of paternalism may be unattainable, but we can strive towards a pluralism which is much less anthropocentric. We as researchers and (simultaneously) educators need more ‘ethical engagement’ (Pashby and Andreotti, [forthcoming](#)) or ‘critical engagement with global sustainability issues’ (Sund, [forthcoming](#)). Yet, without engaging with nonhumans, we may leave EE/ESD occupied in an endless discussion of how complex sustainability is, while Rome burns.

If environmental advocacy is seen as a threat, perhaps the normative ethical assumptions should be critically examined. We need a cogent conception of the aims of education that includes critiques of the status quo, making these aims inherent rather than external to the concept. The educational space for some of the more radi-

cal possibilities requires us to take a clear stance toward *both* human and more-than-human interests, *simultaneously*, and not with one subordinated to the other.

To avoid misunderstanding, we uphold democratic practices in education. Indeed, it is only because of pluralism that there is any care for animals and the environment at all. After all, educational institutions have a long history of housing and developing the advocates for change to the established canons of racial, gender and economic equality. Social movements in support of any discriminated social groups have succeeded because they were successful in recruiting the membership of different and often opposed factions to the cause. Democracy is a mode of organizing that is designed to challenge power, and from this standpoint, democratic education would open the space for contesting the rights and space of more-than-humans. Simultaneously, we must also continue doing our best to instruct students on how to repair environmental damage. We need to teach *for* sustainability, advocating ecological justice for all species. Transformative movements have been powered by passion – and above all – compassion for those oppressed.

If pluralistic education helps students to become actively involved in decision-making (e.g. Öhman 2008), enabling them to better respond to emerging environmental issues (Wals and Jickling 2002), then it should be supported. If this pluralistic education involves inclusive democracy that represents the ‘voice’ of the oppressed more-than-humans (O’Neill 2006), it can be truly celebrated. Thus, we are *for* pluralism as a working process that can serve education, environmental thinking, and decision-making; but against pluralism as an end in and of itself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. One of the prominent dilemmas discussed in journals specialized in environmental education (EE) (e.g. *Environmental Education Research*, *The Journal of Environmental Education* and *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*) and ESD (e.g. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* and *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*) is that between open, plural or democratic education on the one hand and goal-oriented education *for* sustainability on the other hand (e.g. Kopnina 2012a; Kopnina and Meijers 2014).
2. As is the case within the field of animal ethics, environmental ethics is far from being a unified discipline, with various positions located on a continuum, at one end of which is an exploitative, anthropocentrism and at the other an ecocentrism which removes humans from the moral pedestal and, and its most radical version, postulates a ‘biospherical egalitarianism’ which accords equal moral weight to human and nonhuman entities (Garner 2015).
3. While equality refers to the identical apportionment where values or qualities are concerned, equity represents fairness, and requires a more tailored approach. When dividing the planet’s natural resources, equality would provide all animals (including humans) with the same share, while equity would cater resource distribution in accordance with species’ specific needs (for example, requiring a larger territory for tigers than house-cats).
4. Illustrating these differences, in his earlier work Callicott (1980) has argued that animal liberationists and deep ecology (Naess 1973) proponents care about different units – entire species, or habitats, or individual animals, and often come into conflict. However, as Callicott in his later work (1999) and Jamieson (1997) have argued, notwithstanding

these differences animal liberationists and environmental ethicists are on the same side in the transition from an anthropocentric view and towards concerns about the entire ecosystem, and its elements.

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