Implementing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD):
A Policy Ethnography of Taiwan’s Environmental Education Act

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Abstract

The study aims to understand how and to what extent a nationwide education policy can (or have the potential to) contribute to global sustainable development. To this end, this study examined the development and implementation of Taiwan’s Environmental Education Act—a nationwide environmental and sustainability education policy that emerged during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Policy ethnography (Ball, 2016) was used to examine the implementation process and outcomes of the Environmental Education Act. Sources of data included official texts (e.g., national sustainable development action plans, policy guidelines, official announcements, curricular, evaluation documents), two-round of semi-structured interviews with 30 policy implementers of the Environmental Education Act, and approximately 70 hours of ethnographic observation with four policy implementers.

The findings of the study showed that, despite active government investment and support, ESD activities have failed to prompt meaningful transformations required for sustainable pathways. Instead, these efforts resulted in symbolic actions and ‘greenwashing’. Seeing through this illusion of change, Taiwan’s ESD initiative is turning some educators into skeptics. Hence, Taiwan’s case highlights the importance of a collective vision for what sustainable futures mean. Without it, concrete pathways for change are slim in social discourse, leading people to feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the impacts that global challenges will likely to have (Ojala, 2012). Thus, more serious efforts are pressingly needed to move current approaches to ESD beyond a business-as-usual agenda (Huckle & Wals, 2015), towards a more deeply transformative effort that addresses the underlying drivers of unsustainable practices.