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TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURES
FOR ECOJUSTICE: BALANCING
INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETAL
CHALLENGES

ME-WE-ALL

Network of Education
Policy Centers



Explore | Participate | Change



INTRODUCTION

“Neither humans nor any living beings should fall victim to human development. We often forget that human existence on Earth depends entirely on the support of the biosphere and its components.”

Human developments and structures create disparities in wealth, access to education, social and health care, infrastructure, and job opportunities. This leads to widening society's divides and highlights the need to address the societal impacts of individual and community actions. Our behaviors influence both personal and collective well-being and the often-overlooked environment in which we coexist with other species. Our individualistic way of living drives us to accumulate more, often at the expense of other living beings. Fair sharing is not yet a guiding principle in our society, neither among humans nor within our ecosystems. There has been growing interest in sustainability, environmental protection, and social divides within the scientific community (Piketty, 2013). The challenge lies in transforming the habits and mindsets of 'Me' individuals and 'We' organisations to ensure that our children and grandchildren inherit a better 'All': a world that surpasses the one we currently inhabit. Awareness and education about social issues, sustainability, circularity, degrowth, inclusion, and EcoJustice are essential for our world to thrive.

Each segment is followed by a set of questions designed to test comprehension and challenge the current view on environmental education.

These questions are not only asked to inspire reflection, but also to elicit action. They serve as prompts for educators to consider how these intricate and interrelated concepts can be integrated into their teaching practices, empowering them to foster a more inclusive, sustainable, and justice-oriented educational environment.

Sustainability and circularity are once again becoming a driving force for both individuals (Me) and organisations (We) in society (All). But how can we integrate them into our everyday practices? What information should we add to our school cultures to facilitate the well-being of 'Me, We, and All'? How can we raise awareness on the fact that there is no individual well-being without our nature's well-being, and that cooperation is powerful, so we need to think and act together?

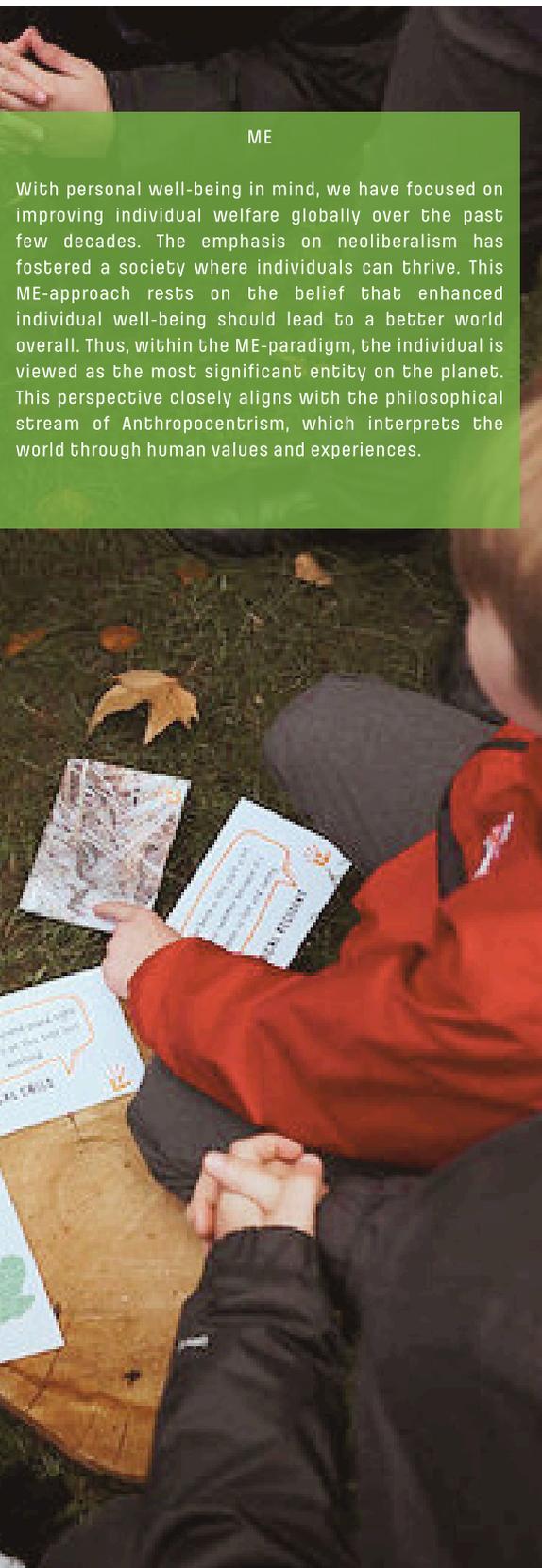
Traditional education focuses on human concerns, such as history, economics, and achievements, and often excludes other life forms. Anthropocentric curricula treat nature as a resource for human use rather than as a biosphere of which humans are a part. Our societies celebrate human progress and innovation yet give little attention to the rights or intrinsic value of non-human species and ecosystems. Even in environmental or sustainability education, the rights of other species are rarely addressed.

Neither humans nor any living beings should fall victim to human development. We often forget that human existence on Earth depends entirely on the support of the biosphere and its components. Unfortunately, with our current behaviour, we not only neglect other living creatures and the world we inhabit, but some still believe they can discriminate against others regarding their rights. Human development should benefit everyone and everything (Me-We-All).

In this article, we share insights and thoughts with school leaders about their crucial roles in educating future generations on responsibility, values, and motivation, which are essential for fostering healthy futures and effecting change.

We will familiarise the reader with the 'Me-We-All' approach, particularly the 'We' phase of the 'Whole-school approach' and the methodology for leading for eco-justice in schools. Finally, we will emphasise the importance of evaluation, as every change process signifies a start toward improvement, illustrated by the Adaptive Cycle of Resilience.





ME

With personal well-being in mind, we have focused on improving individual welfare globally over the past few decades. The emphasis on neoliberalism has fostered a society where individuals can thrive. This ME-approach rests on the belief that enhanced individual well-being should lead to a better world overall. Thus, within the ME-paradigm, the individual is viewed as the most significant entity on the planet. This perspective closely aligns with the philosophical stream of Anthropocentrism, which interprets the world through human values and experiences.

THE 'ME-WE-ALL' APPROACH

The Me-We-All approach serves as a framework that advocates for balancing the needs of individuals (Me), organisations/associations (We), and the overarching society/planetary whole (All). It fosters personal wholeness, social unity, an ethic of global stewardship, and promotes a paradigm shift from the dominant individualistic model to a more systems-oriented, ecological one. It recognises the power of people: individuals (Me) and organisations/cooperations (We), who must pay attention to societal (All) needs and interests.

We believe that investigating different perspectives and views supports understanding, acceptance, respect, and action toward a more sustainable and just world. Organisations, including educational institutions, form the link between individuals and society (Abcouwer et al., 2022).

The 'Me-We-All' approach encourages making decisions that consider the diverse perspectives and needs of individuals (Me), communities, schools, companies, organisations (We), and the environment (All). This approach can contribute to a more just and equitable future for every living creature within the existing biosphere. It seeks natural solutions to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and opportunities for all people and their surroundings in our societies. It balances the needs of the identified areas within sustainable and circular development to simultaneously address environmental, economic, and social needs. Educating EcoJustice propels society toward achieving a balance between social health and justice, fair economic vitality, and environmental stewardship (Hawken & Cox, 1993).

Learning has various objectives, motivations, approaches, and outcomes depending on different perspectives or viewpoints.

Learning for 'Me' is driven by personal motivations and depends on others and organisations to achieve established goals. Consider pseudo-groups or traditional classroom groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Knowledge is personal and tailored to the individual's context and existing knowledge structures. The acquired and processed knowledge produces smarter members (Me) of teams (We) with enhanced skills and competencies.

Learning in a 'We' setting focuses less on individual gain and more on a collective, shared objective (Schilstra et al., 2019), where all members actively contribute to achieving it. The motivation for learning can stem from both individual and organisational sources. Cooperative learning allows organisations (We) to strike a balance between personal and group goals, resulting in expanded knowledge structures. The knowledge gained and processed exceeds what individual members could have accomplished independently. Skills and competencies are developed that go beyond personal boundaries.

WE

The awareness that individual well-being in an increasingly complex world is hard to achieve, shows that cooperation not only improves individual welfare but also helps in achieving shared objectives where all members of the community or organisation are actively involved in this pursuit. The objectives of the WE-paradigm were primarily based on contributing to individual prosperity. However, in modern times, there is a growing recognition of the need to contribute to a better society and world. The focus shifts from an ego-centric view to an eco-centric perspective, seeking balance between individual and societal prosperity.

Learning for 'All' involves engaging with society. It aims to equip students to tackle real-life challenges. This approach not only emphasizes past knowledge but also encourages future-oriented practices. But how do we acquire the necessary knowledge in the contexts where it is needed? How do we cultivate essential knowledge when gaps exist? The objectives are often vague or unclear because the situation is too expansive and beyond the comprehension of individuals, groups, and organisations involved. Consequently, the responsibility is diffuse, resting with no one in particular or, for that matter, everyone.

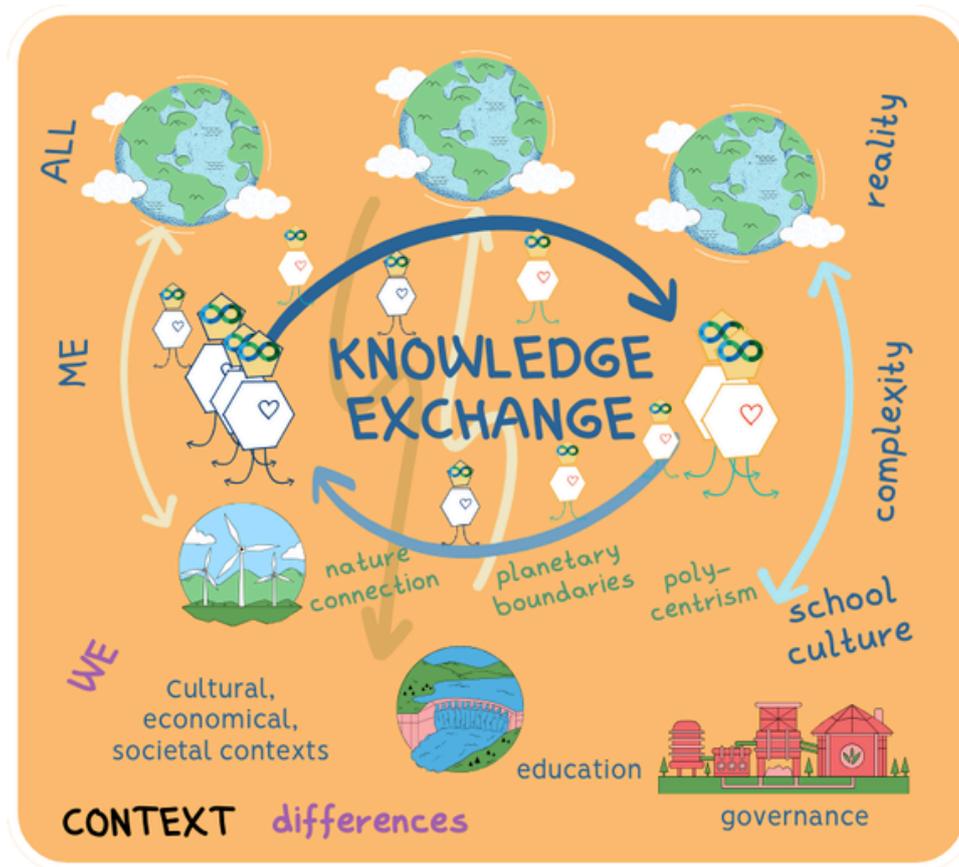
Furthermore, inquiries address the societal variations in learning. Cultural factors significantly shape learning processes, with different cultures exhibiting unique learning styles and educational approaches (Manikutty et al., 2007). Additionally, cultural values and practices are believed to affect learners' motivation and their subsequent achievements (Salili et al., 2001). Research examining the impact of culture (Stevenson et al., 1990) and context on student learning and motivation primarily concentrates on variations in cultural values (Stevenson et al., 1990), practices (Hess & Azuma, 1991; Salili, 1995; Stevenson & Stigler, 1994), and beliefs (Hess et al., 1987; Holloway & Hess, 1985).

Understanding the different views on learning relies heavily on the fundamental insight that people are unique. Everyone possesses their own competencies, abilities, and skills. However, the context in which they were raised is crucial for identifying individuals' roles within the current societal setting.

Values and motivation

Values are the core principles that guide our lives and shape us internally, influencing our everyday behaviours. They are rooted in our childhood experiences. Currently, ownership and greed develop at an early age, leading to a desire for acquisition as we grow up. Striving for more money for individuals and profit for organisations is regarded as normal. However, our values should serve as our moral compass, informing our perspectives on family, community, religion, and politics; they also define our relationship with nature. Values are imparted to individuals through direct parental and educational guidance, as well as through indirect influences from the outside world (Schwartz, 2012). They are passed down through generations via culture, tradition, and education, evolving as society changes. The complex interplay of personal and societal values must be balanced to ensure that no living beings or the biosphere are disadvantaged and that all elements of the natural environment are valued. Our personal attitudes and behaviours in our communities should demonstrate the need to pay attention to one another and our surroundings. Focusing solely on the individual perspective falls short of grasping the crucial societal shift towards a more collective view of a developing future.

- How do your personal values and teaching philosophies align with the Me-We-All framework?
- In what ways do you see current educational practices reinforcing individualism over collective well-being?
- How can school shift from a predominantly individualistic teaching model toward one that fosters systems thinking and ecological awareness?
- What barriers exist to embracing a more ecological and societal model of education?



A challenge for schools and parents is motivating students to care about the environment and their surroundings. Research in environmental education shows that simply transmitting facts about climate change or biodiversity loss is inadequate; students need to feel personally connected and capable of making a difference. Eco-conscious motivation for learners involves experiential learning (outdoor education, gardening, observing nature), place-based projects that link global issues to the students' local context, and student-led initiatives that empower them. The Me-We-All approach aims to motivate various perspectives and promote a vision of education that equips students to improve themselves, contribute to others, and simultaneously protect the planet, like the education for ecojustice does.

The need for an EcoJustice approach in education arises from its promotion of a shift from an individualistic mindset to one that emphasises the relationship between society and nature. The core implication of the Me-We-All approach is that learning becomes genuinely effective and sustainable when individual development (Me), community cooperation (We), and global responsibility (All) are balanced with one another (Takács et al., 2022). Therefore, educating schools for sustainability entails not only the efficient use of natural resources but also the promotion of deeper changes in worldviews and values. Pedagogy should focus not only on transmitting existing knowledge but also on fostering within students a pattern of creative and critical thinking, as well as an adaptable and resilient attitude, so that they are equipped for unforeseen future challenges (Wells & Claxton, 2008).

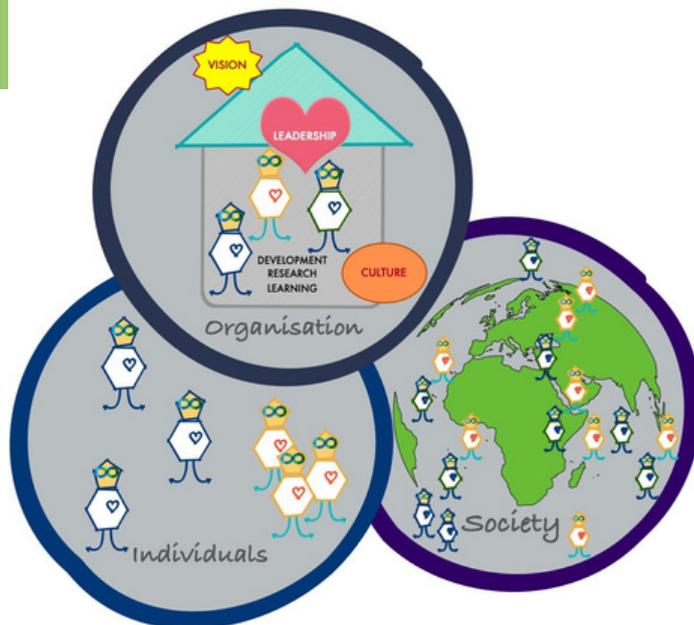
Ecojustice education addresses societal issues by promoting values of stewardship, interdependence, and respect for life. It recognises that individuals (Me) are part of communities (We) that include not only other people but also various species and ecosystems (All). A wealth of research demonstrates the need to shift attitudes in response to the environmental crisis and highlights the importance of lifelong ecological education from an early age.

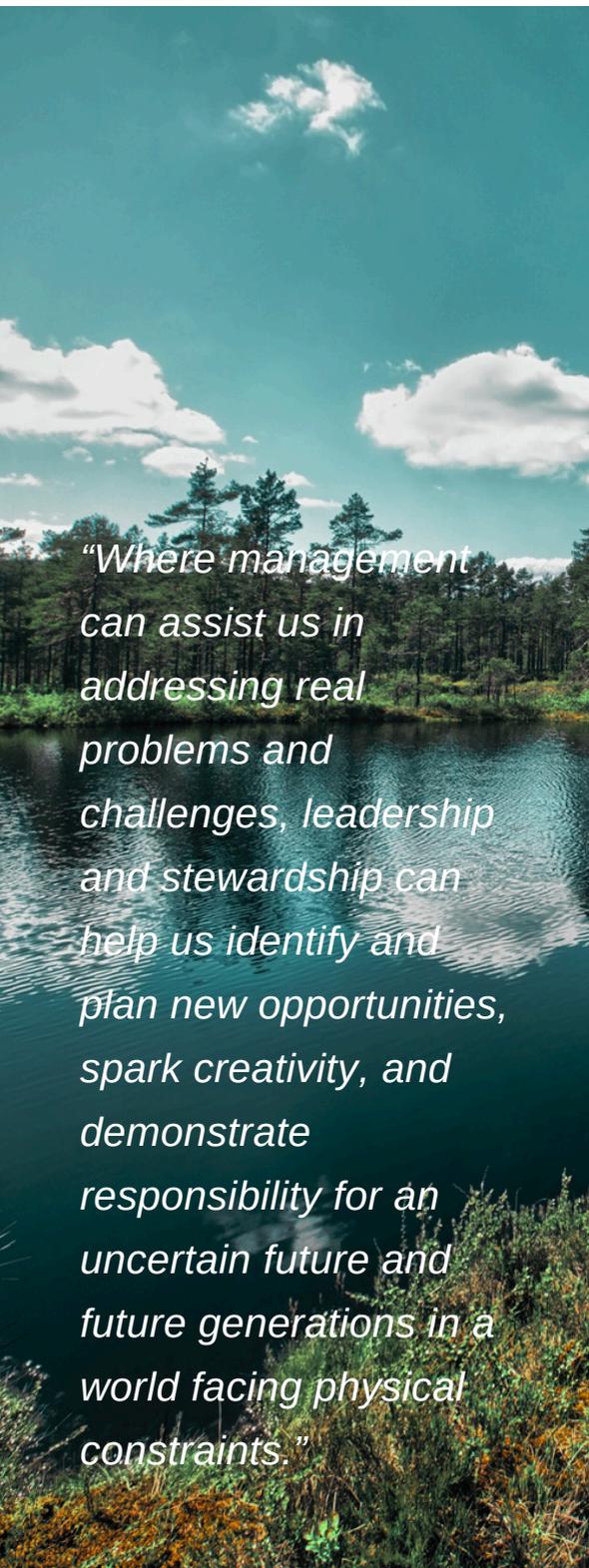
All

As David Attenborough stated, 'Anyone who thinks that you can have infinite growth in a finite environment is either a madman or an economist.' From this perspective, exponential economic and population growth could eventually result in sudden societal collapse if humanity fails to acknowledge the finite nature of Earth's resources. The recognition of limited resources has made people increasingly aware that we must strive for a better and more just world. The ALL-paradigm emphasizes this viewpoint on contemporary developments and the importance of adopting a broader perspective on human development.

- How does your school currently balance individual growth ("Me"), community cooperation ("We"), and global responsibility ("All") in education?
- How does our current curriculum go beyond transmitting environmental facts to build emotional and personal connections with ecosystem?
- How can we cultivate a love for nature and a sense of hope and empowerment in students, rather than overwhelming them with fear?

Introducing EcoJustice into school culture by training teachers and staff help students raise awareness of the importance of coexistence with nature, as it sustains life. Societal well-being cannot be guaranteed without collective well-being and setting an authentic example. It encourages school communities to collaboratively consider equitable living within the planet's resource capacity, in harmony within a society based on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The new perspective on what is happening in schools has a community-building effect. David Sobel (1996) argues that today's education often presents global environmental problems (e.g., climate change, rainforest destruction) too early and too dramatically, leading to anxiety, hopelessness, and inaction in children. Sobel defines this anxiety as ecophobia. The development of this climate anxiety can be actively counteracted in childhood by focusing on a love of nature, experiences, connection to the local natural environment, and experiential learning rather than emphasizing hopelessness. Dedicated school leadership teams form the backbone of the shift in mindsets regarding our natural environment, encompassing both our physical and social surroundings while respecting the global ecosystem and biodiversity. Health promotion, education, lifestyle changes, mutual respect, and peer support are essential in our challenging world.





“Where management can assist us in addressing real problems and challenges, leadership and stewardship can help us identify and plan new opportunities, spark creativity, and demonstrate responsibility for an uncertain future and future generations in a world facing physical constraints.”

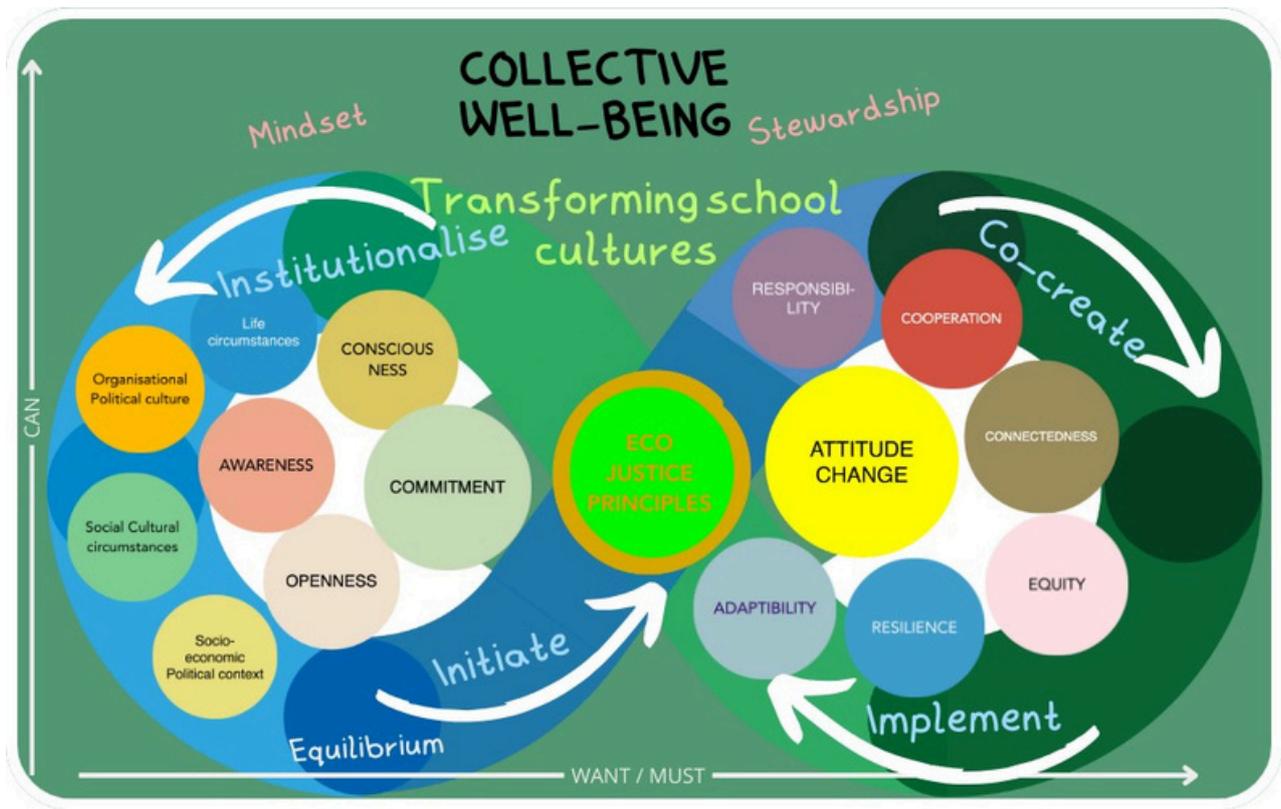
The whole-school approach

An ecosystem in nature can apply to any human-established collaboration where the parts actively work together to create a balanced system in which self-regulation is essential. It is argued by Audretsch et al. (2019) who state that “ecosystems are by definition characterised by cooperation and network externalities, ” demonstrating the relevance of cooperative learning ecosystem thinking. They facilitate flexible, adaptive cooperative learning and working. Engaging in an ecosystem makes members more resilient due to the mutual dependency and cooperation within the environment, focusing on the well-being of ‘All. ’ This is reflected in stronger ties between stakeholders compared to a regular network setting, which focuses on ‘We. ’ Especially in current times, with many stakeholders and rapidly changing environments and the challenges they bring, it is crucial to work together.

The whole-school approach effectively educates students through leadership and stewardship teams, which are partnerships among leaders, teachers, school staff, parents, caregivers, and the broader local community. This collaboration fosters a positive school culture and a sense of belonging. The approach actively engages families and the entire school community, promoting inclusivity and respect. Beyond academic learning, it prioritises creating a healthy environment for students and enhancing the community’s well-being, as reflected in the curriculum, school activities, and interpersonal relationships. It supports the development of crucial social and emotional skills and resilience while mitigating risk factors within families, schools, and the community. To fulfil this approach, understanding the nature of change, careful planning, and ongoing evaluation are crucial.

The nature of change

Any development toward an improved world is an ongoing process, as described by the Adaptive Cycle of Resilience (ACoR) model (Takács et al., 2019; Takács & Abcouwer, 2020). Human development materialises through change and the dilemma of what we want, must, and can do in a given situation (Heene, 2002). The symbol of eternity illustrates this continuous process of change. The logic of development is quite simple when we begin reasoning from an equilibrium point (the bottom left quadrant of the model). In this quadrant, we clearly understand what we want and must do, and we can fulfil those needs. The necessity for change can arise from anywhere, presenting challenges that we must address. For this process, we need to utilise the creative competencies of all participants. In cooperation, we must co-create potential solutions, from which one or a few must be implemented.



This new equilibrium differs from the one we had before the change began. We can anticipate a fresh need for change to arise in this setting. As the eternity sign indicates, change does not cease but evolves. Adaptability to new situations and resilience in facing challenges are essential for sustaining oneself throughout the change process.

Adaptability and sustainability are crucial challenges for everyone in our rapidly changing world. We must deal with ever-changing societal challenges, and besides adapting with specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes in the different stages of change, we also need to be aware of the various perspectives of experiencing and acting in change and its effects on individuals (Me), communities or organisations (We), society, and the environment (All) (Abcouwer et al., 2022).

Where management can assist us in addressing real problems and challenges, leadership and stewardship can help us identify and plan new opportunities, spark creativity, and demonstrate responsibility for an uncertain future and future generations in a world facing physical constraints.

Management-Leadership-Stewardship

When we are certain about what we want to achieve during the transition in the ACoR model, managers perform effectively. However, in times of uncertainty, creative leaders excel at facilitating adaptation to new circumstances by introducing innovative ideas to regain certainty. Stewardship encompasses values, ethics, and morals, safeguarding all resources with a human responsibility to care for the natural world. These stewards seek long-term solutions, ensure the availability of competencies to facilitate change, and foster new futures while considering all stakeholders: they are the epitome of 'Me-We-All'. Stewardship shifts the focus from 'solving immediate problems,' which managers and leaders tend to prioritise, to a broader and longer-term perspective, resulting in a sustainable present and future for individuals (Me), communities (We), and our environment (All). The Lead for EcoJustice programme collaborates with school stewardship teams to plan, evaluate, and implement change.



Planning education

By applying these principles in the process of changing school culture, we identify the following activities across the various phases of the cycle.

In the initiation phase, we recognise the need for

- checking and building on the already existing practices within the school and outside,
- relating to and adopting relevant practices from inside but certainly also from outside the school that fit the needs of the everyone involved in the actual setting needing change.

In the co-create phase we need to

- exploit the creative potential available within the school setting
- to cooperate and cocreate within the school's committed network or ecosystem: students, teachers, families and local partners to internalise the practices.

In the implementation phase they should

- appreciate openness, creativity and diversity during implementation
- care for each other, our nature and our ecosystems
- strive for inclusion, ensuring to protect all living things via values and attitudes
- practice equity, equality, and value the contributions from all.

In the institutionalisation phase they should

- enhance knowledge sharing and knowledge development within the network or school ecosystem
- make everyone feel safe in the school environment and in the wider community
- ensure that the school activities dovetail with the local and global needs
- assure that we know how to measure the impact of the activities so that we can evaluate the results.

As can be recognised in this reasoning, management, leadership, and stewardship capabilities are essential. The sequence outlined here represents a straightforward approach to change. In practice, however, the process is often not linear. Many challenges and opportunities can be addressed with minor adaptations that are easily implemented without requiring extensive change processes. Nonetheless, prioritizing the sustainability of the change process is crucial for advancing the school. Restarting the cycle repeatedly, as we adapt to new situations in our rapidly changing world, is a lifelong learning journey.



- Which phase of the Adaptive Cycle of Resilience best describes my school's current state, and why?
- How comfortable are you with change and uncertainty in education, and how more resilience can be built?

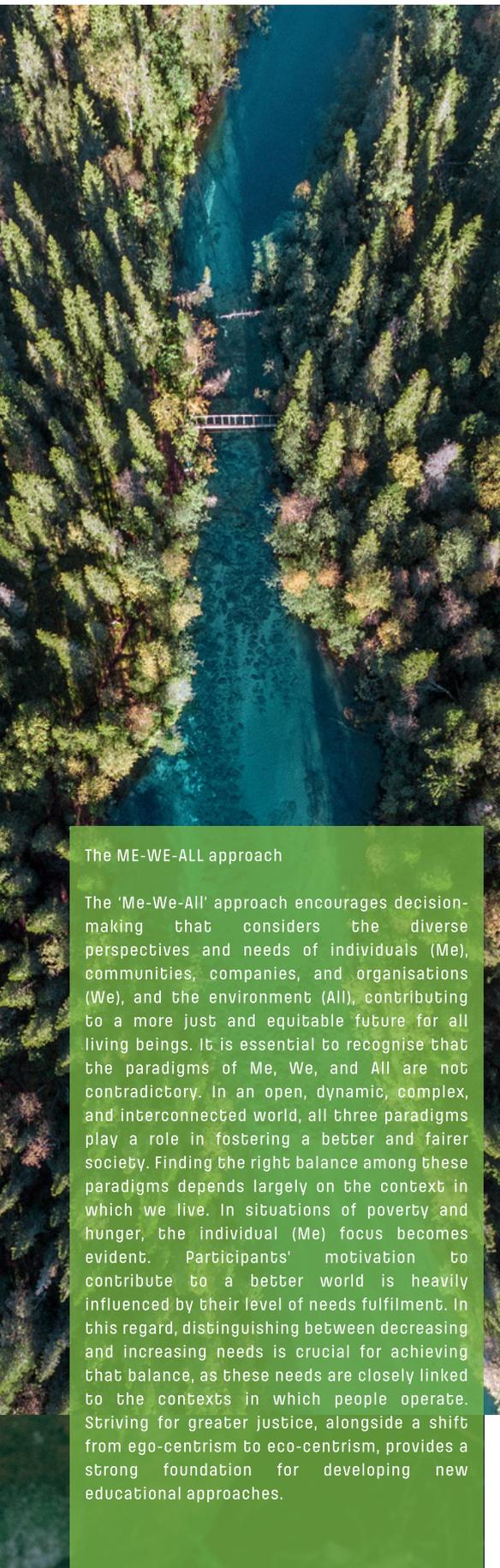
In light of these change processes, the individuals ('Me') and the school's network ('We') act as partners in cooperative lifelong learning for society ('All'). The stages necessary to transform and elevate awareness include co-initiating, co-sensing, co-inspiring, co-creating, and co-shaping (Scharmer & Yukelson, 2015). Continuous awareness for self-reflection and evaluation is crucial for fostering a lifelong learning attitude, forming the foundation for regular decentralised evaluation that is essential for individuals, teams, organisations, and educational institutions. In this respect, a centralised evaluation framework can be established and adaptively integrated to suit the participant or stakeholder.

The need for evaluation

Where self-reflection and evaluation of each participant in the change process are crucial, every change process should be accompanied by a strong overall evaluation approach. Within that broader perspective, the organisation should

- permit continuously monitoring the functioning of the school ecosystem within the society
- both from top to bottom as well as from bottom to top and from inside -> out and outside -> in
- facilitate monitoring of the learning and working climate within and outside the ecosystem
- monitor the cooperation ties between the ecosystem partners and the environment/society.

This evaluation structure fosters resilience in the ecosystem by monitoring its function and enabling adaptation when unforeseen disturbances in society or the ecosystem arise. It relies heavily on individuals' capacity to thrive, the collaboration to excel, and society's willingness to embrace improvements, derived from the advanced education we cultivate.



The ME-WE-ALL approach

The 'Me-We-All' approach encourages decision-making that considers the diverse perspectives and needs of individuals (Me), communities, companies, and organisations (We), and the environment (All), contributing to a more just and equitable future for all living beings. It is essential to recognise that the paradigms of Me, We, and All are not contradictory. In an open, dynamic, complex, and interconnected world, all three paradigms play a role in fostering a better and fairer society. Finding the right balance among these paradigms depends largely on the context in which we live. In situations of poverty and hunger, the individual (Me) focus becomes evident. Participants' motivation to contribute to a better world is heavily influenced by their level of needs fulfilment. In this regard, distinguishing between decreasing and increasing needs is crucial for achieving that balance, as these needs are closely linked to the contexts in which people operate. Striving for greater justice, alongside a shift from ego-centrism to eco-centrism, provides a strong foundation for developing new educational approaches.

SUMMARY

A responsible way of living harmonises with nature, preserving planet Earth for current and future generations while enhancing the well-being of all. In an era of heightened environmental challenges, such as biodiversity degradation, climate change, species extinction, and resource depletion, it is crucial to find ways to ensure that human prosperity does not compromise the environment or our social heritage.

The need to redefine human development emphasises the driving principles of sustainability's interconnected environmental and social pillars. In this article, we highlighted the necessity to respect and be fair to nature and other living beings, to reconnect our lives with nature, and to live in balance, cooperation, and harmony. For centuries, human history has shown that everyone's contributions form the foundation for future development. However, this role has evolved in recent decades into an extreme form of selfishness, focused solely on 'what's in it for me' as a form of ecocentrism. We must restore the right balance between ancient knowledge, modern science, and technology to ensure, through cooperation, sustainable human development for the planet. Describing this balance is crucial for schools that educate children and younger generations.

To restore harmony and connection between humans and nature, knowledge, information, and methodology in education must be improved, and education on environmental subjects must be increased. Considering the different interests of individuals (Me) and communities (We) in balance with our environment and respecting the interests of all living things (All) forms the key to future development (Abcouwer et al., 2022).

For the individual level (Me), health and justice are crucial for the global well-being of both people (We) and the biosphere (All) we inhabit. A range of fundamental human needs can be identified to enhance individual and societal well-being, including social health and justice, which support sustainable societal, social, and personal development.

In line with Orr (2004) we argue that environmental problems are not created by ignorance but by educated people (e.g. industrial development, economic systems, technological innovations), and therefore the ecological crisis stems from a crisis of human thinking and behaviour. Education plays a crucial role in focusing on changing attitudes. Schools cannot consequently be value-neutral, they must take responsibility for the worldview and decision-making skills they impart to their students. Education must not only impart knowledge, but also moral responsibility. They should develop critical thinking in students about consumption, economic models and sustainability. Learning should involve students in decision making to understand their (Me) impact they have on their communities (We) and their environment (All).

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The edufocus series is written to support the goals of the Lead for EcoJustice project aiming to transform school culture to improve education outcomes and promote eco-justice through specialized professional development programs for school leaders.

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