

The University of Notre Dame Australia

From the Selected Works of Dr Sandra Wooltorton

Winter May 1, 2006

Quality Criteria for ESD-Schools: Guidelines to Enhance the Quality of Education for Sustainable Development (Review of Book by Breiting, Mayer & Mogensen)

Sandra Wooltorton, *The University of Notre Dame Australia*

Quality Criteria for ESD-Schools: Guidelines to Enhance the Quality of Education for Sustainable Development. Soren Breiting, Michela Mayer and Finn Mogensen. Vienna: SEED, 2005, 48 pp. ISBN: 3-85031-048-5

The significance of education in creating a sustainable future is now being internationally recognised, particularly through initiatives inspired by the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. At the same time, increased interest is being shown by governments, teachers and local school communities in progressing towards sustainable school visions and goals. Thus, this user-friendly little book will make an excellent contribution to each of these levels of interest through the provision of guidelines which sketch out, explain and summarise the domain. As well as school-based uses it will be an essential reference for people in ESD policy positions and should be an excellent, compact information source for student teachers. The book is the work of the School Development through Environmental Education (SEED) and Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) networks and is the result of a two-stage, multi-stakeholder international research project involving 13 countries, including Australia.

My first reaction to the book was to balk at its title, for two reasons. The first was a suspicion that the terms ‘quality’ and ‘criteria’ would be used narrowly as bases for assessment and accountability – as they have been in a wide variety of Australian education contexts in recent years. But this fear was quickly dispelled when the authors stated on p.9 that “quality criteria ... cannot be considered as a tool for quality control”. The authors specifically declare that quality criteria should not be confused with performance indicators because “quality control should give orientation and inspiration” (p. 9).

The second concern I had with the title was a little more difficult to dispel: the uncritical use of the term ‘ESD’. For example, on p.4 the authors propose the use of ‘ESD-Schools’ to replace the more commonly used ‘eco-schools’ or ‘green schools’. Their stated aim is to broaden the environmental issues focus to include aspects of sustainable development such as participation, equality, self-efficacy and social justice. Whilst this direction is definitely welcomed, there is still the problem of the widely documented contention surrounding the term ‘sustainable development’ and in my opinion, a brief upfront explanation of the issues around the term could have been included. Broad brush strokes by those who have moved on from the issue do not help people in schools grappling with the inevitable criticism from local community activists who now struggle against environmental degradation being executed under the banner of sustainable development. Similarly, the title of the book and the introduction brushes over the debate in environmental education concerning the use of the term “ESD”. Fortunately, these criticisms refer only to the title and not the content of the book.

The authors have identified three criteria, each subdivided into what they refer to as smaller areas. These are: criteria regarding the quality of teaching and learning processes (nine smaller areas); criteria regarding school policy (four smaller areas) and criteria regarding the school’s external relations (two smaller areas). Each smaller area presents a clearly written example and an explanatory rationale, followed by a short list of between two and five sub criteria. This format takes up most of the book, providing a succinct and positive picture of the breadth and possibilities for learning and futures in school transformation scenarios.

As well as the parameters of ESD that are broadened and clarified by the guidelines, the strength of the book is undoubtedly its examples and its rationales. Readers