# Examining the Potentials and Challenges of Grassroots Activism as a Pedagogical Framework for Implementing Inclusive Sustainable Development in Societies, Locally, Regionally and Globally

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**Preliminary Discussion Paper: Examining the Potentials and Challenges of Grassroots Activism as a Pedagogical Framework for Implementing Inclusive Sustainable Development in Societies, Locally, Regionally and Globally**

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## Abstract

Sustainability education and research continue to expand and are challenging higher educational institutions (HEI) to provide leadership. Learning and development in this area remain in its infancy and integrative pedagogies for fostering student leadership and environmental citizenship are similarly underdeveloped. The current study was designed to locate and scope these issues at an international Japanese university. It explored relevant literature and identified a potential research agenda for sustainable development education in the local HE context, giving specific attention to conceptions of grassroots activism with regard to the study of sustainability and inclusive leadership (IL). A preliminary literature review and bibliometric analysis were conducted to help delimit the proposed research area in Higher Education Sustainable Development (HESD) research. The initial literature review highlights a lack of IL ideas in sustainable development (SD) studies, and a corresponding shortage of sustainability education in IL teaching practice. It further noted several pedagogical recommendations for both IL research and HESD, thus highlighting the potential scope for this investigation in the local context. Findings point toward a benefit for pedagogical development in HESD through a cross-fertilization of theory and practice in these aforementioned fields. It further highlighted the need for pedagogical framework development specific to international education in the Japanese context and the need for suitable theoretical models to guide research and implementation of these new and urgently needed emphases.

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## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the unprecedented global socioeconomic and environmental issues caused by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive sustainable development is being promoted as a conceptual framework to help envision and achieve equitable and sustainable societies for all. To this end, the contributions of both leadership and education are pivotal. Higher Educational (HE) organizations are called upon to lead in educating leaders who value inclusion and sustainability. In this regard, the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) approach emphasizes local grassroots activism within communities and experience-based learning to be suited for multicultural and intergenerational settings. Grassroots activism is defined as the collective action of individuals who promote and take action for a cause from the local level. While grassroots activism covers a wide range of issues and is practiced in different forms, this study focussed upon environmental grassroot activism to demonstrate how such initiatives can serve as movements that can educate, motivate and empower societal leaders in ways to integrate the values of inclusion and sustainability into different societal levels.

In this current study, the authors documented the traits, behaviors, processes and actions of the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University's 'Environmental Activists' (EAs) in their collaborations with the 'Grassroots Environmental Activists' (GEA). The EAs consist of APU students from different nationalities and cultures who have been involved in environmental conservation and cultural exchange activities. The GEA is a group of Beppu locals with diverse ages and professional backgrounds. In particular, the authors documented and assessed the factors that drive inclusivity and its impact within and between the two groups. Via lectures, workshops, volunteering and cultural events and conducting extensive surveys and interviews the authors investigated the impact of grassroots activism on students from inclusive leadership and sustainability perspectives. Additionally, the study was designed to identify the drivers, rewards, challenges and barriers of practicing grassroots activism as a pedagogical tool to promote inclusive leadership and sustainability in a highly diverse setting such as the collaboration between EAs and GEAs.

The study was designed to create a deeper understanding of, and insights into the potential of grassroots activism as a pedagogical tool for inclusive leadership and sustainability education. Findings and lessons learned will be utilized to integrate IL skills of collaborative conservation into APU's traditional class activities to encourage student motivation and commitment for application to real-world situations in their home countries. The purpose of this preliminary research review is multifold: (1) to position our project within overlapping fields of study; (2) to identify and locate areas of current and proposed educational activity in the fields of IL and SD

and their relevance for our context; (3) to conduct a bibliometric review of potentially relevant research and to initiate the archival process to build some depth and breadth of the knowledge required for our project.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Scoping the literature

The authors used a systematic literature review to assure the quality and robustness of our research design and findings by making the literature search explicit and reproducible (Riebe et al., 2016). According to Petticrew & Roberts (2006), a systematic literature review takes on characteristics of a comprehensive search for relevant publications on a specific theme with the use of search protocols and a critical synthesis and appraisal of the literature, which, in turn, minimizes bias and provides reliable findings (Snyder, 2019). With this approach, we were also able to account for the multidisciplinary and fragmented conditions of sustainability and inclusive leadership studies while keeping in mind that these two strands of literature might overlap. Following Petticrew & Roberts (2006) and (Tölkes, 2018), the steps in our systematic literature review included:

1. Formulated the research questions.

2. Determined the criteria for the inclusion of publications.

3. Performed the search for publications.

4. Screened the search results found to fulfill the criteria for selecting publications.

5. Critically appraised the selected publications.

6. Synthesized the findings from the selected literature.

7. Disseminating the findings.

The main research questions addressed in this literature review are: What is the current state of knowledge of sustainability and inclusive leadership pedagogies? What are the gaps in the literature that can lead to future pedagogical studies for bridging sustainability and inclusive leadership?

To conduct the comprehensive literature review, the authors included all articles found using a search string of keywords. The keywords were first selected by the two researchers who conducted the initial search of literature pertaining to sustainability pedagogy, leadership pedagogy, and inclusion. The list of keywords was further refined through discussions with other members of the research team. Only publications that contributed to the theme of integrating pedagogies on sustainability and inclusive leadership were included.

To collect all relevant publications, the authors conducted the search in two ways. First, we conducted our search using the Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science database, which is the world's leading scientific citation search database that is often used for literature reviews given its comprehensiveness of publications including titles from a broad array of disciplines (Li et al., 2018), in October 2020. All articles that contained the search terms in the title, abstract, or

keywords were considered. Using the selected keywords, the search found 3,037 articles for sustainability pedagogy and 5,185 articles for leadership pedagogy. The next search was refined by including only those articles that were associated with inclusivity and/or inclusive leadership.

As a result, 147 articles remained for the sustainability pedagogy literature, while 182 articles remained for the leadership pedagogy literature. All of these articles were reviewed by research assistants to identify basic information on research focus (higher education or not) and method (qualitative or quantitative, research design, unit of analysis and context), which were used for a quantitative assessment of the literature.

To conduct a critical assessment and synthesis of the literature, all articles were screened for eligibility based on the abstracts. Two authors, who are expert in the field of sustainability, reviewed the sustainability pedagogy literature while the other two authors who are expert in the field of leadership, reviewed the leadership pedagogy literature. The four authors read the abstracts to identify articles to be selected for further analysis and synthesis. For the present analysis, a decision was taken to isolate an initial 20 articles in each research field, to be expanded upon later as the study proceeds. This process resulted in selection of 20 articles for both the sustainability pedagogy literature and the leadership pedagogy literature.

## 2.2 Results from the selected literature

The results from this preliminary review were presented at the 2020 Asia Pacific Conference (Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Beppu). A summary is provided below, followed by a concise discussion of the 20 identified articles from each of the respective fields of IL and sustainability.

### 2.2.1 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Forty-two studies on education for sustainability (at grassroots levels) from peer-reviewed journals were found, of which 21 studies (50%) focused on higher education. In regard to research methodologies, 22 studies (52 %) used qualitative methods, two studies (5%) used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. Only **two** studies were based on the Asian context (focusing on Malaysia). Four references (10%) were related to leadership. Whereas, **none** of the selected references covered inclusive leadership.

For further analysis, 20 of the ESD articles were selected based on their relevance to SD pedagogy and the keywords used in this study from which six trends were observed that included:
1. The need for holistic, coherent and targeted sustainability education (SE) strategies;
2. That education for sustainable development (ESD) can be complex due to the needs to provide knowledge, skills, values, and willingness to act;
3. That more research is needed in a diversity of domains including professional areas, education providers, and nationalities;
4. That integration of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in daily life practices within curriculum is needed;
5. There is an increasing demand for research on education for sustainability within the field of early childhood education;
6. There us need for including sustainability-related courses in MBA curricula and management programs for administrators and practitioners.

**Discussion of the trends in the ESD literature reviewed**

(1) The first trend identified from the reviewed articles was the need for a holistic, coherent and targeted sustainability educational (SE) strategy (Sidiropoulos, 2018) to promote inclusive development.

**The strategies should cover:**

a. Addressing a wide-range from early childhood educational aspects.

b. Developing eco-pedagogy (Kopnina & Saari, 2019),

c. Training educators/teachers (Aznar et al., 2018; Gedžūne & Gedžūne, 2015; Gedžūne, 2014; Loubser, 2015; Stir, 2006),

d. Implementing adequate educational policy curriculum documents to support teachers (Nicholls & Thorne, 2017), teaching techniques (Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, & Carrier, 2007), utilizing ICT (Bello-Bravo, Zakari, Baoua, & Pittendrigh, 2019),

e. Developing the tools for assessment of graduates' suitability leadership attributes in their working place. (Thomas, Holdsworth, & Sandri, 2020)

(2) The second trend highlighted that education for sustainable development (ESD) is complex as it needs to provide knowledge, skills, values, and willingness to act. Based on the Fröhlich, Sellmann, & Bogner (2013) research, ESD is expected to raise awareness and insight in students to make informed decisions and act accordingly. Despite the lack of research on students' perceptions of ESD and environmental education (EE) and the large discrepancy between EE and ESD (Maurer & Bogner, 2019), Ploum analyzed essential competencies for sustainable entrepreneurship (Ploum, Blok, Lans, & Omta, 2018), and Sidiropoulos reported that students' view and initial sustainability perspective are influenced by personal and educational factors (such as gender, age, culture and discipline of study) (Sidiropoulos, 2018). However, providing adequate education can equip students to have positive economic, social and environmental influence (Rodríguez-Solera & Silva-Laya, 2017). The research of Stir (2006), documented the lack of confidence among students in their abilities to make wise decisions or to take appropriate actions. Moreover, Thomas et al. (2020) suggested that educational institutes should develop and use appropriate curricula so that students can learn how to implement leadership in sustainability despite the opposing influences of the workplace.

(3) The third trend suggests that more research is needed in a diversity of domains including professional areas, education providers, and nationalities. As stated earlier in the first trend, training of educators/teachers is essential (Aznar et al., 2018; Gedžūne & Gedžūne, 2015; Gedzune, 2014; Loubser, 2015; Stir, 2006), for encouraging and facilitation of teacher preparation (Boeve-de Pauw, Van Hoof, & Van Petegem, 2019), expand the language facilitation policy (Mafela, 2009), and training practitioners such as farmers (Bello-Bravo et al., 2019) and agriculture engineers (Rodríguez-Solera & Silva-Laya, 2017) and investigation of the diversity and

multicultural perspectives in the context of early childhood (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019) indicate to support the students/trainers to successfully practice and implemented inclusive sustainable development. The third tend is also too dense. Break it up and as more than a few words or transform it as I suggested for the first trend.

(4) The fourth trend stresses the need for integration of sustainable consumption and production in daily life practices within curricula (Prince, 2010). In that line the research of Fröhlich et al. (2013) showed that hands-on educational program (part of the program was conducted on a farm) of education for sustainability (EfS) in regards to agriculture, food and consumption fostered intentions in 5th graders to consume in an environmentally friendly way. They also stressed the importance of raising awareness of adolescents to be 'sustainable consumption' consumers with considerable purchasing power and often with the ability to influence their families' shopping behaviour (Fröhlich et al., 2013). A survey of secondary school teachers in Malaysia showed that teachers are enthusiastic about integrating sustainable consumption education in their learning and teaching despite lacking formal training (Ho, Kamaruddin, & Ismail, 2016).

(5) The fifth trend highlights the need for more research on education for sustainability within the field of early childhood education. The findings of the review article of Boldermo and Ødegaard (2019) indicated, the lack of particular and targeted research on migrant children's situations within the context of early childhood education for social sustainability in the concept of diversity and multicultural aspects and migrant children's experiences of belonging for future sustainable societies. Pauw et al's (2019) study recommended the specific focus on effective goals, identification of student characteristics as well as encouraging and facilitating teacher preparation for field trips in nature of primary school students (Boeve-de Pauw et al., 2019).

(6) The sixth trend highlighted the necessity for inclusion of sustainability-related courses in the MBA curricula and management programs for administrators and practitioners; such as business students (Kopnina & Saari, 2019), start-up companies/entrepreneurs (Ploum et al., 2018), construction profession (Thomas et al., 2020), agricultural engineers (Rodríguez-Solera & Silva-Laya, 2017) and farmers (Bello-Bravo et al., 2019). Christensen et al' (2007) investigation of the "Top 50 Global MBA programs," showed increased focus upon inclusion of sustainability-related courses (Christensen et al., 2007).

## 2.2.2 Education for Inclusive Leadership (IL)

From the 47 articles on 'Education for Inclusive Leadership found in the scoping of the literature, 37 studies were deemed appropriate for the current review. Among these, 21 studies (57%) focused on higher education (HE) and only 3 (8%) were related to sustainability. Notably, none were based in the Asian context. In terms of the research methodology, 36 (97%) used a qualitative approach, while 27% of the case studies were based upon mixed methods and 22% used action-research methods.?? Something is incorrect in the previous sentence.

The following trends were noted (a) 21 references (57%) focused on higher education; (b) 36 references (97%) were qualitative; (c) case studies constituted (27%), while mixed qualitative

methods (22%) and action-based research (11%) were often used. Notably, only **one was** based on the Asian context and 3 references (8%) were related to sustainability.

Based upon the articles reviewed, the authors decided to select 20 articles that could be directly used in the study of IL, that is, they were related to, or included studies in which the desired keywords were used. Six emergent trends were summarized below:

1. Suggestions to address education of the person as a whole (aim for personal growth, enrichment, skills training, etc.);
2. Education programs need to become more inclusive and be cognizant of diversity on many levels;
3. Contextual and organizational factors need to be taken into account and efforts toward institutional-wide application need to be made;
4. Offer real-world training experiences by incorporating experiential learning in higher education;
5. Utilize peer-learning, interdisciplinary teaching and draw on the strengths of alumni networks and multi-stakeholders across communities to build capacity in higher education;
6. Make efforts toward comprehensive leadership program assessment.

**Discussion of trends in the IL literature**

(1) Among the studies reviewed, the first theme refers to the need for incorporating individual growth in the design of leadership education (Farias, Hastie & Mesquita, 2017; Read, Betancourt & Morrison, 2016; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020). More specifically, studies in sports education point to the gains in leadership development that may be achieved through directly addressing social dimensions of expressing power, dependence and autonomy, and the uses of peer education in skills training and competence development (Farias et al., 2017). Likewise, nursing education that emphasizes socially responsible leadership practices, while being cognizant of students' individual differences in terms of social and cultural diversity, was found to be important for building leadership capacity in the student body (Read et al., 2016). Other perspectives on leadership and mentoring in higher education (Pascale & Ohlson, 2020) emphasized that educators need to challenge gendered and other stereotyped notions of leadership among students and take care in designing learning experiences to mitigate reinforced gendered ideas of leadership.

(2) A second theme identified was referred to as, 'cultivating an active awareness of diversity and the necessity for practicing inclusivity on a number of levels.' The researchers, commonly referred to the importance of including an awareness of diversity, and social justice issues in leadership training coursework (Burns & Schneider, 2019; Sultan, Torti, Haddara, Inayat, Inayat & Lingard, 2019). Other authors underscored the importance of gender issues (Yen, Riskin, Margherio, Spyridakis, Carrigan & Cauce, 2019).

Inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogies that inform leadership educators and the need for theoretical models that inform pedagogical practices were highlighted in a number of studies (Chunoo,& Callahan, 2017; Guthrie, Jones & Osteen, 2017; Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria & Brown, 2016; Lima, West, Winston, & Wood, 2016). These authors particularly

emphasized these approaches for students of institutions of higher education which are traditionally occupied with adult education and training (Morrow, 2015; Duram, & Williams, 2012). This was especially relevant for the focus of the current objective, the development of education in sustainability studies (Nomura & Abe, 2010; Duram & Williams, 2012).

(3) The third theme evident from the literature in this area highlighted the importance of focusing upon the relevant contextual and organizational factors and utilise them in making efforts toward institution-wide applications. The following researchers highlighted the importance of developing appropriate frameworks for understanding 'understanding what'? (Skalicky, Warr Pedersen, van der Meer, Fuglsang, Dawson, & Stewart, 2020; Read et al., 2016).

Other authors emphasised the importance of applying theoretical models and assessment scales that can reflect perspectives of inclusion, gender and diversity (Yen et al., 2019; Lyons, Brasof, & Baron, 2020; Lima et al., 2016). A number of researchers further addressed the importance of the development of pedagogy (Morrow, 2015 ) and/or specific programs within higher education that address leadership development (Owen, Hassell-Goodman, & Yamanaka, 2017; Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria, & Brown, 2016; Farias et al., 2017; Quaglieri, Penney & Waldner, 2007 ) or a focus directly on sustainability education (Nomura & Abe, 2010; Duram & Williams, 2012; Burns et al., 2019).

(4) Fourthly, the literature review revealed that incorporating real-world training experiences through experiential learning and adjacent pedagogical approaches should be prioritized in higher education. Research in this area was based upon research and novel approaches in sustainability education (Duram & Williams, 2012; Savage, Tapics, Evarts, Wilson, & Tirone, 2015), that included perspectives informed by art education (Gayá Wicks & Rippin, 2010), and organizational learning and community program management (Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Burns & Schneider, 2019; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009; Quaglieri, Penney & Waldner, 2007).

Learning in these overlapping areas are expanding, but it is clear that building leadership capacity in tertiary education will benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach that incorporate multiple meanings of inclusivity and expanding and/or rebuilding traditional (stereotyped) forms of leadership.

(5) In the fifth instance, the findings of this review revealed the importance of utilizing peer-learning, interdisciplinary teaching and drawing on the strengths of postgraduates and alumni networks and multi-stakeholders across communities to build capacity in higher education. In this regard, studies highlighted the importance of developing and sustaining networks for mentoring and peer support (Morrow, 2015; Skalicky et al., 2020; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Yen et al., 2019; Burns & Schneider, 2019; Sultan et al., 2019), with additional emphasis on remaining cognizant of cultural perspectives (Owen, Hassell-Goodman & Yamanaka, 2017; Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Guthrie, Jones & Osteen, 2017) and inclusivity (Read et al, 2016; Sugiyama et al., 2016; Farias et al., 2017). Many researchers emphasised the value that is created for higher education by developing student-alumni networks and how these can be pathways for change and invigoration.

(6) Finally, the sixth theme identified in this research was the importance of integrating comprehensive assessment and evaluation perspectives into leadership programs with the aim of improving them. The researcher studied, emphasised the value of adopting models of social change

of traditional education formats (Read et al., 2016) and/or of applying new frameworks to strengthen existing programs (Skalicky et al., 2020; Quaglieri et al., 2007). Savage et al. (2015) stressed the importance of cultivating sustainability leadership in higher education through rigorous attention to evaluating and incorporating individual perspectives evident in the students. The insights gained from these studies collectively, stress that the multi-faceted approach is required in building and expanding projects, curricula and programs, designed to cultivate leadership in higher educational spheres.

## Summary of the Literature Review

This brief document is a very brief summary of the contents of the articles selected for in-depth analyse that were limited the expanding field of education for inclusive leadership and sustainable development. To conclude very briefly, it appears that there exists a clear benefit for connecting inclusive leadership education to sustainability education and research. The lack of such integration is a research gap that could be/should be addressed within this research project. In terms of research needed, there is a need for more quantitative studies in the field of inclusive leadership. Similarly, additional benefits are to be gained for education for sustainable development from real-world examples such as case-studies, grounded theory research efforts and documented cases of experience-based methods.

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