

# Unlocking the Future: Transforming Education Through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Between technological advancements, shifting demographics, and the environmental challenges our world is facing today, there has never been a more critical juncture for equipping students with the knowledge and skills for sustainable development. By instilling a sense of environmental responsibility, ethical decision-making, and innovative problem-solving, students are not only prepared to navigate the uncertainties of the future but also play an active role in shaping a more sustainable, equitable, prosperous, and resilient world for generations to come — something Charles Hopkins, *UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education Towards Sustainability* at *York University*, is passionate about. In his role, Charles has not only worked with faculties of education, ministries, and international organizations to position sustainability as a purpose of education but has also partnered with *Learning for a Sustainable Future* (LSF) as an honorary advisor to underpin these efforts, in part through *Resources for Rethinking* (R4R): a database for teachers.

Offering more than 1,800 free or low-cost lesson plans, activities, videos, books, and other materials — many of which can be filtered by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — R4R supports educators to readily teach about sustainability topics and to guide students in becoming engaged and take responsible actions towards sustainable development. “R4R is one of the few databases in the world that offer teacher-reviewed and curriculum-tailored content from Canadian perspectives,” says Charles. “One can access resources through specific core subject disciplines or grade levels, making it very teacher friendly. For educators of all backgrounds, it is easy to find appropriate and specific materials to be used in the classroom.”

In tandem with databases and resources like R4R, Charles has some other insights on how to transform education.

## **1. Moving from teaching about sustainability towards teaching for sustainability**

Sustainability is a very complex topic as it is not just about the environment but means balancing broader environmental, social, and economic issues. Charles acknowledges that teaching about sustainability often feels like an additional burden on teachers in adding more content to an already crowded timetable and dealing with very complex issues which might be uncomfortable at times. He adds “The R4R database helps educators with ESD teaching content and pedagogy to address these complex sustainability challenges in age-appropriate ways, make them relevant for their students, and move from teaching about to teaching FOR sustainability.”

## **2. Fostering global citizenship to encourage young voices.**

Achieving sustainability — or sustainable development — is the unanimously shared vision of the global community. To address this in the classroom, Charles advocates that combining global citizenship education with education for sustainability is a good place to start. "Instead of [education] being solely for serving and enhancing the knowledge and skill of the individual, we need to look at education as a broader common good, ensuring graduates understand their relationships with each other, with the planet - past, present, and future." He continues, "We must develop a consciousness of our individual and collective behaviours and foster student interest and ability to envision alternatives."

## **3. Thinking of education beyond the disciplines**

Charles urges educators to participate in opportunities to learn about global and local sustainability challenges and how to implement sustainability in education systems. "The current core disciplines, delivered individually, do not prepare students for life let alone for a sustainable future for all. Holistic education opportunities are needed." The core disciplines brought together with the arts and real-world learning will help envisioning and working towards a sustainable future and opportunities like R4R pave the way for teachers to get started.

## **In Conclusion...**

As teachers harness the power of R4R to help their students navigate the complexities of our world and their roles within it, there is work to be done on a systems level, too, as space and resources are needed for holistic and experiential learning. This is at the core of LSF's work as a Pan-Canadian charity advocating to embed sustainability in education systems across Canada. Both LSF with its R4R resource play their part in the journey to ignite a future where quality education is synonymous with learning for sustainable development.