

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Moral Education on 26 Jan 2023, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2159348>

Citizenship, character, sustainability

Differences and commonalities in three fields of education

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Abstract

An adequate response to the environmental and sustainability issues we now face cannot be limited to single perspectives, disciplines, or ways of knowing, and instead requires an interdisciplinary approach. Despite the connections between the fields of citizenship-, character- and sustainability education, they have thus far run parallel to each other, without any substantial convergence. This paper focuses on the conceptual and historical reasons for this lack of integration, exploring the tensions among them perceived by many scholars and practitioners, such as an individual vs. a social vs. a global focus, a deliberative vs. fact based pedagogic approach, and an individual vs. socio-political educational context. The paper ends by exploring different ways in which these three fields of education might be integrated.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore interdisciplinary issues that arise when addressing sustainability and questions of individual and societal well-being. Our approach is based on the idea, voiced by UNESCO, that addressing issues of sustainability and well-being requires that considerations, principles and methods from both sciences and humanities be brought together.

An adequate response to sustainability challenges cannot be limited to single perspectives, disciplines or ways of knowing. (UNESCO, 2014, p. 177)

In 2015, the UN launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 universal development challenges for humanity e.g. Zero Hunger, Responsible Consumption and Production, and Climate Action. Education is considered a key instrument to achieve the SDGs, as well as goal four being 'Quality Education', which includes the following target:

By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8)

UNESCO (2017) emphasises developing learners' empowerment to act and to participate in socio-political processes; and action-oriented, transformative, problem-oriented, collaborative and inter/transdisciplinary pedagogies. Here sustainability-, citizenship- and values- or character education are brought together. However, despite their connections, thus far, citizenship-, character- and sustainability education have run parallel to each other without substantial convergence. Several scholars have argued these fields support each other (Altorf & Berkowitz, 2006; Peterson, 2020; Tilbury, 1995), and there are certainly traditions within education where citizenship-, character- and sustainability go hand in hand (Kristjánsson, 2013, Öhman, 2016), yet many scholars and educators see these fields as at odds (Jerome & Kisby, 2020; Jordan, 2021; Vare & Scott, 2007; Wals, 2011). The present paper focuses on the following two questions:

- Q1. What tensions exist among citizenship-, character-, and sustainability education?
- Q2. What opportunities are there for integrating citizenship-, character-, and sustainability education in a pluralistic democracy?

We begin with a brief exploration of the historical and conceptual developments in each field of education, which we then draw on to depict four main tensions and (mis)alignments between them. Lastly, we suggest three ways these tensions can be addressed.

2. Historical and conceptual developments

The fields of citizenship-, character-, and sustainability education have evolved in very different ways; they are based on different theoretical foundations and have been promoted by different institutions. Character and citizenship education have a long tradition in Western educational thought, going back to the same roots in antiquity although their recent histories are different. Sustainability education gradually emerged as a major concern in the latter decades of the 20th century through various United Nations meetings and agendas. Following the establishment of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, sustainability education has become one of the main policy concerns of the UN and is explicitly mentioned in various national and international educational policies.

We now explore each of the three fields historically and conceptually, how each of them has developed and, in particular, how recent educational history has affected them in similar or different ways. This is too short to do justice to these rich traditions but, hopefully, substantial enough to highlight the tensions between them, as well as pointing to opportunities for integrating them.

Citizenship education

Citizenship education goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Their ideas differed but both aimed at creating citizens 'who would receive, reflect, and transmit the moral and political values of past generations' (Riesenberg, 1992, p. 44).

Proper education and activity made a Platonic citizen, and it is in his educational theory that Plato makes his Cretan city an innovative state. [The function of education] is that training in virtue from childhood which makes a man eager to become the perfect citizen, knowing both how to rule justly and how to obey. (Riesenberg, 1992, pp. 40–41)

Aristotle's ideas depart substantially from those of Plato, but he too thought education should prepare citizens to participate in the life of the city state:

Education is all important for Aristotle because it creates good citizens. Citizens of a democracy must be especially good, since they all share in governing and implementing and continue to shape the constitution, which is the formal cause

of their felicity. They must be trained to perform public acts, to learn both to obey and to govern. (Riesenberg, 1992, p. 43)

In the 18th century, states had become extensive and politics was no longer practised face-to-face. With this change, citizenship became detached from public virtues and the citizens were 'submerged into the general will and lost that individuality which Aristotle, Augustine, and Machiavelli valued so highly' (Riesenberg, 1992, pp. xx).

Kant and Rousseau caused a sea change in European thought on political legitimacy in the 18th and 19th centuries. Kant moulded the concept of 'general will' from Rousseau into his own philosophy about citizenship in *Metaphysics of Morals* where he describes three attributes of citizens: lawful freedom, civil equality and civil independence, which unifies the other two by emphasising how each citizen owns his 'existence and preservation to his own rights and powers as a member of the commonwealth, not the choice of another among the people' (Weinrib, 2008, pp. 9–10).

For Kant, 'being a citizen' is not dependent on moral qualities and Rawls (2001) takes a similar stance describing his theory of justice as 'freestanding' in that the political is detached from the moral. This makes citizenship education in the Kantian tradition depart from the ideas of Plato and Aristotle who saw the political being continuous with the moral.

The line of thought from Kant and Rousseau up to Rawls and other contemporary liberal thinkers, is reflected, for instance, in a publication by the Council of Europe (2010) titled *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*:

'Education for democratic citizenship' means education, training, awareness-raising, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law. (Section I, 2a)

Although the text does not mention Rousseau or Kant, the conception of citizenship education is not a *moral* conception such as in Plato and Aristotle, but a *political* citizenship education (Harðardóttir & Jónsson, 2021; Oxley & Morris, 2013). Thus, contemporary

citizenship education is generally considered, and practiced, distinct from character education.

Character Education

Character education, as a subset of moral education, was a dominant educational paradigm in antiquity, with Plato and Aristotle as the main thinkers. It was later adopted by the Church and given religious interpretation making it the dominant educational paradigm in Europe from the Middle Ages into modernity. Though the theoretical foundation had changed, the language of virtue and good character continued to be central into the 20th century:

The language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 23)

After the mid-20th century, moral education began to lose footing and more emphasis was laid on 'scientific methods' such as the behaviouristic ideas of Skinner. In cognitive science, where meaning had initially been central, input-output language took over mirroring the behaviouristic stimulus-response language (Bruner, 1990). At the same time, technical views led to a rejection of an ethical basis for education (Lagemann, 2000).

Later, moral education came under pressure from the generation inspired by the students' revolt of 1968, where older traditions were rejected in favour of pluralistic and liquid views about values and social structure (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1986/1992). Consequently, only very few countries in Europe had a special curricular subject with focus on moral values (Taylor, 1996).

By the end of the century, moral education was again on the agenda; authorities looked to schools to respond to social problems and many teachers could not see themselves turning to religion to fill up the moral void that secularisation had generated. Moreover, increased multiculturalism called for emphasis on peaceful, multicultural coexistence, as in the UNESCO publication from 1994, *A Sense of Belonging*:

We live in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world where each segment of society tends to regard its own values as sacrosanct and its own needs as paramount. Yet although we belong to different cultural, ethnic, religious and

linguistic groups, we share one planet and a common humanity. How then, can we contrive to live in peace? (p. 3)

Towards the end of the century new ideas emerged. Within psychology, Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences was influential (Armstrong, 2003), Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence was widely adopted, and positive psychology became an academic field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 1998). Although these trends were not based on moral theories, they were more open to moral considerations and normative questions than approaches based on behaviouristic and cognitive psychology had been.

Moral theory underwent radical changes at a similar time; Carol Gilligan (1982) challenged the Kantian-oriented moral philosophy of Kohlberg by advancing ethics of care. Others followed, Nel Noddings related ethics of care directly to education in *The Challenge of Care in Schools* (1992) as did Jane Roland Martin with *The Schoolhome* (1992). Monica Taylor (1996) describes these changing tides in moral education in the 1990s:

There appears to be common agreement that in the last 25 years, theory and practice in moral education and development have focused on individual, largely cognitive, development, and liberal rationalist theories of morality and psychological processes. The currently fashionable ideas of communitarianism, emphasise, by contrast, meaning making, including that of developing morality and identity, through social, especially dialogical, interaction in community. (p. 11)

Now, 20 years into the 21st century, character education as a subset of moral education has become one of the main trends in educational theory and philosophy in the West. The strands of character education most prevalent today are either based on Aristotelian virtue ethics (Arthur et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2020) or on theories in positive psychology (Duckworth, 2016; Seligman, et al., 2009) or some mixture of the two (Kristjánsson, 2012; Snow, 2020). While the first connects back to Ancient Greece, when character and citizenship were seen as enmeshed, the second tends to take a fairly individualistic approach, both in theory and practice.

Sustainability education

Environmental education (a precursor to sustainability education) became a distinct discipline in the 1960s, prompted by increased public awareness of environmental problems (Gough, 2013). It brought together aspects from the nature studies, conservation education, and outdoor education movements formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early approaches reflected these beginnings, with a focus on apolitical, scientific content and skills, and spending time in nature, assuming ‘awareness of nature would lead to changes in individuals’ attitudes and behaviours’ (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 2).

The 1970s saw the environmental education agenda become more progressive, evident in the UNESCO-UNEP Belgrade Charter in 1975 and Tbilisi Declaration in 1977 that both specified ‘active student involvement in investigating and working toward resolving environmental problems’ (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 2). Attention was increasingly directed to the links between the economic, social, political, and ecological spheres.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the acquisition of pro-environmental behaviour(s) emerged as a central aim (Stevenson et al., 2016). Drawing on the fields of social and behavioural psychology, the behavioural approach sought to address the realisation that teaching merely the facts of ecology and environmental problems did not seem effective – there was too little focus on practical solutions (Breiting, 2000).

However, during the mid-1980s, socially critical theorists challenged the dominant view that the desired outcome of environmental education was predetermined, pro-environmental behaviours. They argued that a focus on eliciting responsible environmental behaviour, ‘fails to recognise the influence of socioeconomic structures on individual behaviour’ and that ‘the goal remains contrary to the idea of empowering individuals and communities to make their own decisions about environmental issues and to organise for collective political action’ (Stevenson et al., 2016, p. 2).

The late 1980s saw the beginning of a shift from environmental education to ‘education for sustainable development’. The term ‘sustainable development’ emerged in the IUCN *World Conservation Strategy* (IUCN, 1980, Section 1.2), which aimed to combine development and conservation/environmental concerns, as well as understand environmental issues within the social, economic and political context. However, the term gained more prominence with the publication by The World Commission on Environment

and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future*, in 1987, which defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (p. 43).

Beginning in the late 1990s, continuing throughout the 2000s, emphasis was placed on developing competencies ‘that enable individuals to participate in socio-political processes and, hence, to move their societies towards sustainable development’ (Rieckmann, 2018, p. 41) e.g. systems thinking; collaboration; self-awareness; problem-solving; and critical and innovative thinking (UNESCO, 2017).

Meanwhile, in December 2002, the UN turned sustainability education into a full-fledged policy through the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005–2014, with the overall goal:

To integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behaviour that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 4)

The DESD saw a swell in ESD initiatives and practices (see UNESCO, 2021).

In 2015, the UN launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see Introduction), which have become a guiding framework for sustainability education internationally. UNESCO (2017) emphasises competencies; empowerment to act and to participate in socio-political processes; and action-oriented, transformative, problem-oriented, collaborative and inter/transdisciplinary pedagogies. Thus, theorising sustainability education has moved away from both its predominantly science/ecology-based beginning and the early behavioural approach, towards a more socially critical, participatory and capabilities focussed approach, bringing it closer to citizenship education, in particular global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2017). However, in terms of practice, much sustainability education is still taught within the natural science disciplines.

3. Tensions among sustainability-, citizenship and character education

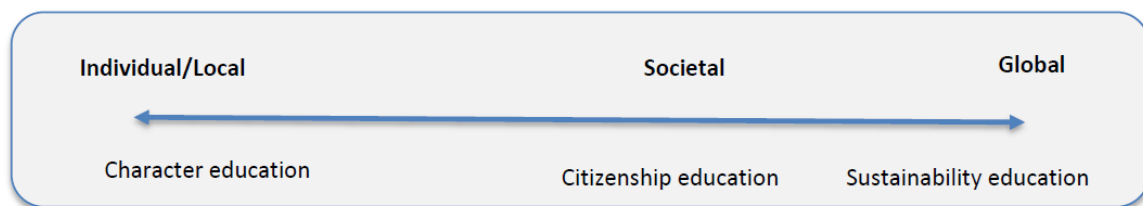
The previous section drew out some main trends within the three fields of education. Now we turn to more specific ways in which these three are seen to differ,

plotting four schematic pictures showing how they are seen as aligned or misaligned with each other.¹

The tension that perhaps first comes to mind derives from a difference in scale. Character education is often thought of as inward looking, whereas citizenship- and sustainability education are concerned with a social context where the relevant scale may include the entire globe:

Figure 1

Difference Among the Three Fields Due to Scale



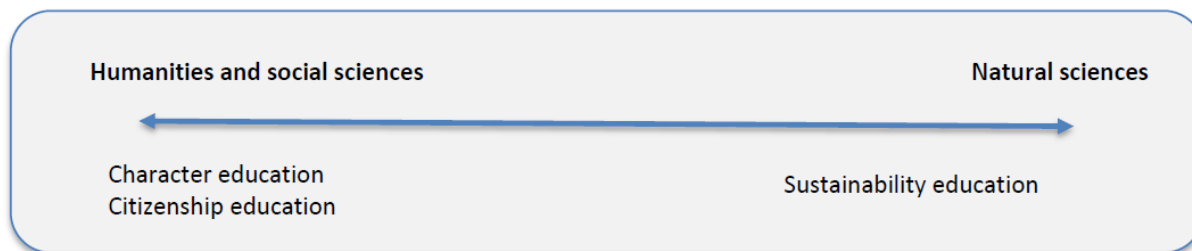
Although citizenship education is often concerned with local culture and politics, an important aspect concerns human rights, global citizenship, multiculturalism, and globalisation quite generally (Harðardóttir & Jónsson, 2021; Oxley & Morris, 2013). Sustainability education is similar in unavoidably adopting a global perspective, setting the two fields apart from character education, which often foregrounds individual ethics and moral motivation (Kristjánsson, 2012, 2020), emotional intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995) or psychology (Duckworth, 2016).

According to the above perspectives, citizenship- and sustainability education stand together, apart from character education. However, viewing these three fields in terms of their 'foundational disciplines', character and citizenship education fall on one side, belonging to human-centred disciplines, while sustainability education is typically grounded in the natural sciences.

¹ The four pictures are not supposed to reflect the diversity and complexity of each field but to draw out perceived differences. Many of these differences have been questioned, e.g. regarding the individualistic nature of character education (Kristjánsson, 2013) and the overarching factual basis of sustainability education (Vare & Scott, 2007).

Figure 2

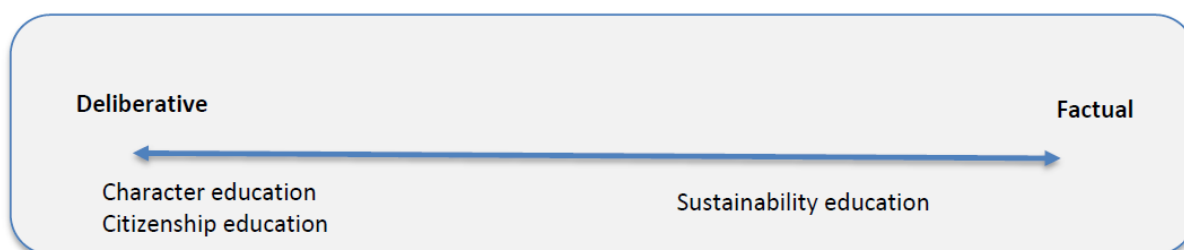
Difference Among the Three Fields Due to Foundational Disciplines



A similar picture emerges when we consider whether these three fields are predominantly deliberative and pluralistic in their pedagogical approach (character and citizenship education) or are mainly factual (sustainability education).

Figure 3

Difference Among the Three Fields Due to Basis for Pedagogic Practice



When we say that character education and citizenship education are deliberative and pluralistic, we are aware of different scholars, writing both on ethics, political philosophy and character and citizenship education, who reject relativism about basic moral and political truths (Hursthouse, 1999; Kristjánsson, 2020; Noddings, 1992; Nussbaum, 2006; Rawls, 2001). This, however, does not undermine the claim that in both ethics and education, one must acknowledge pluralism about philosophies of life (Rawls, 2001). Rather than resolving complex issues by simply doing away with what has been found to be false, the focus is on engaging with multiple perspectives through dialogue and even making the situation more complex by bringing in further contextual factors (Westheimer, 2019). Van Poeck et al. (2016) refer to this as the democratic paradox in sustainability education.

Whereas [the debate between normative and pluralistic approaches] is characterised by a variety of nuanced positions, its contours are nevertheless defined by a sharp opposition between two extremes: on the one hand, an instrumental ap-

proach that sees the factual account of the state of the planet as a non-negotiable basis for normative guidelines on how to think and act and, on the other hand, a pluralistic approach that understands pluralism as a sheer fact of plurality, resulting in a relativistic tolerance that grants every opinion equal value. (p. 807)

When viewing things from the perspective of science, the state of the earth calls for immediate action, whereas a moral or a political perspective casts doubt, in terms of different conceptions of the good life, over any proposed way of acting. What is a matter of fact from the point of view of natural science is often an issue for debate within moral and political settings.

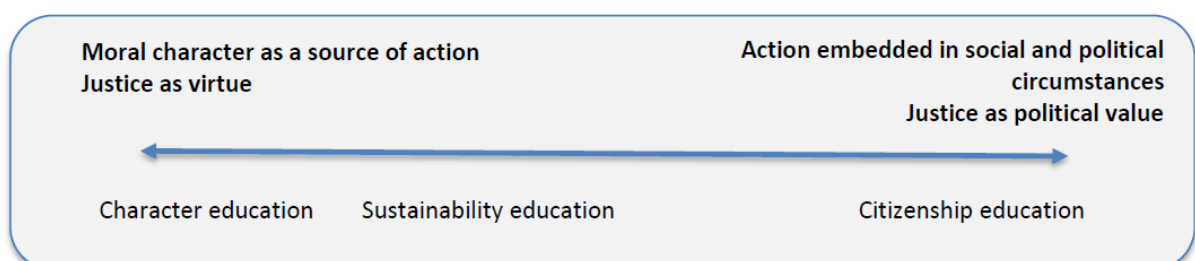
Several scholars have argued that sustainability education must address the value base and behaviour of individuals, seeing disrespect for nature as an important root of unsustainability (Bonnett, 2012; Hursthouse, 2007; Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2017; Podger et al., 2010). Those conceiving of sustainability education along these lines may align themselves with those emphasising moral character or individual virtues as an important educational aim but find themselves criticised by those who emphasise the social and political context and nature of education. Jerome and Kisby (2020) argue that in character education the political reality simply drops out of sight:

Justice is rendered a personal character trait and politics largely disappears from view, to be replaced with the search for individual moral improvement. (p. 12)

Thus, we have a fourth kind of tension among these three fields of education:

Figure 4

Difference Among the Three Fields Due to Moral Versus Social Context



4. Opportunities for integration

We suggest the three fields of education can be integrated in at least three ways. The first two ways see the tensions as potential obstacles to integration; the first tries to side-line them (tensions to be avoided), the second aims to overcome them through revision (tensions to be negotiated). The third way views the tensions as providing positive educational opportunities (tensions to be engaged with).

The first way – ‘the optimistic way’ – builds on the fact that despite tensions the three fields also overlap. Although depicting tensions, Figures 1–4 also show overlap that is far from superficial. Thus, the overlap in foundational disciplines among citizenship and character education – along with the observation that historically, they come from the same roots – might indicate that their similarities run deeper than their differences. Meanwhile, an emphasis on values in at least some strands of sustainability education (Vare & Scott, 2007) aligns it closely with character education (Jordan, 2021).

Although the optimistic way might seem reasonable from a theoretical perspective, it will be thorny path in practice. Jordan (2021) observed that despite overlap between sustainability- and character education, practitioners still retain reservations about integration, for example, the study revealed SE experts’ reservations regarding a perceived individual nature of CE, as well as concern regarding normative concepts and their tension with democracy and pluralism. In practice, ‘the optimistic way’ may be thwarted by reservations outweighing commonalities.

The second way – ‘the revisionary way’ – views the tensions as drivers for revision within each field. Character educationists might want to revise their focus on individuals (Figure 1) and make the social and global (as well as environmental) aspects more prominent in their very definition of character. Likewise, while sustainability education has a ‘home port’ in the natural sciences, at least historically, where factuality prevails over normativity, the current challenges to sustainability are not due to lack of factual knowledge but result from human motives, morality and prevailing ideologies of consumption (Hursh, et al., 2015). So, without abandoning the factual basis in the natural sciences, sustainability educationists must find a way of addressing critical and normative aspects central in at least some strands of both character and citizenship education (Jordan, 2021; Jónsson & Macdonald, 2021; Wals, 2011; Westheimer, 2019). Eco-citizenship and ‘global education for

sustainability citizenship' (Huckle & Wals, 2015) are examples of citizenship being 'revised' to integrate sustainability. Similarly, service-learning common to both citizenship and character education, can be reoriented to include eco-service learning, i.e. service-learning addressing environmental or sustainability issues (Jordan, 2021; Podger et al., 2010).

Although the revisionary way seems promising, and certainly invites teachers and students to approach each of the three fields with an open mind, it may ignore the real tensions that exist in society and, thus, fail to adequately foster students' agency and problem-solving abilities.

The third way – 'the critical way' – sees the tensions as advantages for deep learning and education for change. Conventionally, education has had the role of reproducing among the young generations the ideas, knowledge, and values of older generations, largely in a conformist manner. The current global crises, both environmental and social, require a departure from this paradigm. Various scholars have suggested different forms of education for change, such as Mezirow's transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Wolff, 2022); and Sterling's conception of three levels of learning and change where the third levels 'is creative and involves a deep awareness of alternative worldviews and ways of doing things. It is . . . this transformative level of learning, both at individual and whole society levels, that radical movement towards sustainability requires' (Sterling, 2001, p. 15).

Dewey (1939/1998) placed great emphasis on the educational power of disagreement and later scholars, for instance Diane Hesse in her *Controversy in the Classroom*, have developed those ideas further (2009). Similarly, Freire, hooks, and others associated with critical pedagogy have seen disagreement and tensions as central to deep learning and social engagement (hooks, 1994). In all these approaches, tensions or disagreements are not devices the teacher brings to the classroom in order to stir up students' emotions, but real issues deeply embedded in the life of the students and teachers to which they relate both cognitively and emotionally. Likewise, the perceived individual focus of character education versus the social nature of citizenship education can be a point of discussion and learning within sustainability education where personal preferences and global concerns clash. Similarly, many feel compelled to do something while finding it challenging to make any meaningful change. Discussion about such issues can be framed as a debate on the role of individual actions versus societal structures in working towards sustainable societies.

Relatedly, within all three fields dilemmas imbued with complexity and uncertainty are confronted, calling for the development of learners' skills such as what UNESCO (2017) refers to as 'collaboration competency' (see above), and what the Council of Europe (2016) refers to as 'Tolerance of ambiguity', and what some character educationalists have referred to as public- (Treanor, 2010) or participatory virtues (Ferkany & Whyte, 2012), all of which might be fostered through the 'critical way'.

5. Concluding remarks

We have shown the commonalities between citizenship-, character-, and sustainability education, as well as the differences that have led to existing tensions between the fields. An adequate response to the sustainability issues we now face requires a transformative and transdisciplinary approach (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). The three different 'ways' of integration we described offer alternate avenues for addressing the tensions but the third way has, in our minds, the most potential for transformation through directly engaging the tensions rather than trying to avoid them.

The tensions between the fields could be seen as dealing with different aspects of the larger whole of individual, societal, and environmental well-being. Perhaps the most salient overlapping feature of these three fields is the fact that not everything falls smoothly into place; problems are complex, people's philosophies of life are varied, perspectives are different and yet people must live together, one generation after another, on this small planet that we have. Education that engages with this challenging situation cannot always avoid or smooth out the tensions and controversies that arise in the classroom but must engage with them at different levels – cognitive, affective, as well as social.

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