# Research Proposal 3

# Social, transformative and sustainable learning: a children’s community in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

# Rationale and relevance of the study

The purpose of this proposed study is twofold, namely to explore innovative perspectives from the Global South on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and to address evident gaps in the literature regarding approaches to learning within ESD. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014) ends this year, yet current scholarship (Kumar, 2008; Reid and Scott, 2007; Scott and Gough, 2003; Sterling, 2001) and international reports highlight the continuing need to promote holistic, dialogical and transformative approaches to sustainable education and learning. Respectively, sustainable education needs to be multi-disciplinary and embrace all facets of life, hence holistic. It recognizes the interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental processes, hence it requires dialogical relations between these. Furthermore, ESD aims at promoting change in learners and in their interactions with the environment to attain sustainability, therefore it needs to be intrinsically and instrumentally transformative. To foster these aspects, emphasis is needed on (i) exploring the contributions that locally developed sustainable learning models can offer to the global ESD policy framework, and (ii) linking local contributions to national and international contexts (Earth Charter Commission, 2004; Sterling, 2010; UNESCO, 2012). Additionally, critics of ESD (Bowers, 2011; Kahn, 2008; González- Gaudiano, 2005; Jickling, 2005; Lumis, 1998) contend that dominant discourses and scholarship on sustainable education and learning are exceedingly rooted in Western intellectual traditions, research methodologies and policy arrangements. They exhort scholars and policy-makers to take into account diverse sustainable learning practices from developing countries, to shape theories and practices of education in more inclusive and participatory terms.

This research addresses these gaps through the case-study of social, transformative and sustainable learning in Jhamtse Gatsal Children’s Community (JGCC), located in a remote and underdeveloped area in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Having lived and volunteered within the community for one year in 2012-2013, I gained insights into their educational, cultural and social practices. This experience draws my research focus on the exploration of *how* Eastern and Western approaches to sustainable education and learning are integrated, through the combination of indigenous knowledge, Buddhist training (based on the values of love, compassion and kindheartedness), Montessori pedagogy and experiential learning. The methodological approach in this study is qualitative in nature and based on a range of ethnographic methods and policy document analysis for data generation. Findings from this proposed research have manifold potentials:

* to inform academic and policy ESD discourses of the unexplored -theoretical and practical- implications of combining Western progressive pedagogies with indigenous knowledge- and value-based practices, within a ‘community curriculum’ beyond the school environment;
* to raise awareness among policy makers of innovative grassroots and community-based sustainable learning practices, which foster cooperation between public and private action through community learning in a remote and underdeveloped area. These practices bear relevance to education policy planning in India and internationally, as they constructively challenge traditional education paradigms and institutional arrangements;
* to bridge methodological gaps in the ESD literature –which tends to focus on traditional case-study approaches (Reid and Scott, 2007; Scott and Gough, 2003) and to confine itself to exploring education and learning within the school environment. The use of triangulation techniques (including ethnographic methods and policy document analysis) in this proposed research will allow linkages to be made between local and global sustainable learning practices. This will be achieved by broadening the perspective on education and learning to a scale beyond the school unit, in order to strengthen the connections between policy and practice.

# Research background and focus

In the last five decades, international and intergovernmental planning assigned education a crucial role in fostering environmentally sustainable practices, through ESD initiatives worldwide (UNESCO, 2012). The notion of sustainable education has changed over time from a mechanistic to a co-evolutionary perspective, with implications on how learning is conceived and achieved. The former views environmental learning in adaptive terms, where the acquisition of knowledge and skills is relevant to prevent and solve specific environmental issues. The latter is intrinsically transformative and it synthesizes multifold aspects of learning (e.g. social, cultural, ecological) in the notion of sustainable education. It promotes a model of learning that fosters change in the learner’s consciousness and relationship with the environment (Scott and Gough, 2003; Sterling, 2001). However, current ESD literature lacks evidence of models that outline innovative approaches to sustainable and transformative learning, particularly from developing countries. In this context, the case study of JGCC can be illuminating. The community is located in Tawang, a remote and underdeveloped area in the North-Eastern Indian Himalayas. It was started in 2005 by a former Buddhist monk to provide a ‘home’ to orphans and children of disadvantaged families belonging to the local Monpa tribe, of Tibetan origins. Today it accommodates 85 children, approximately 20 staff members, and international volunteers on a temporary basis. The community school complies with the prescriptions of the Indian Right to Education Act 2009, but at the same time its curriculum is based on the combination of Montessori pedagogy, experiential learning on renewable resource strategies (e.g. solar energy, organic farming, drip irrigation, wormcomposting techniques, masonry, stonecutting and paving by using in-house materials, kitchen, facilities and waste management) and traditional activities of the local tribal culture. Buddhist training on the values of love, compassion and kindheartedness is embedded in daily activities beyond the classroom, and pursued through meditation practices, traditional Tibetan-Buddhist debate to sharpen analytical and philosophical skills, study of Tibetan language and art, music and dance classes. Furthermore, the community periodically organizes workshops on Montessori and experiential learning, self-reflection and practice-evaluation with all staff-members, children, local villagers, authorities as well as local and international experts.

This proposed research aims to explore (i) how indigenous knowledge and Buddhist values interact with Western knowledge in the daily practices of the community and (ii) how these two perspectives challenge each other, to bring to light what learning has developed from this experience. Recently, perspectives from Eastern philosophies have provided theoretical contributions to the definition of sustainable education (Earth Charter Commission, 2004; Reid and Scott, 2007; UNESCO, 2000). These focus on the interconnected nature of reality, where the pursuit of ‘sustainability of the self’ becomes a metaphor for achieving sustainable systems (Witoszek, 2013). For instance, the ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ (Toh, 2010) movement promotes active engagement ‘with the economic, political, social, and ecological problems of society...not separate from Buddhist spirituality, but is very much an expression of it’ (King, 2009, p. 1). The interdependence and oneness -between self-reflection and changes in the broader environment- in the Buddhist approach evoke links with the stated purposes of ESD, as a holistic and transformative process. However, evidence of these approaches in the ESD literature is limited to initiatives in the Global North (Lumis, 1998; Tuck et al., 2014), with no relevant cases from more complex contexts in developing countries.

# Theoretical framework

In this proposed research, concepts pertaining to three theoretical domains are employed. Namely, the notion of transformative learning will meaningfully locate the exploration of the educational model in JGCC within the context of ESD. Secondly, social learning theories will connect to the idea of transformative learning by closely investigating the nature of the relationships among learners, teachers, community members and the environment in JGCC. Thirdly, the analysis of pedagogical aspects in JGCC will be informed by combining critical thinking and progressive learning theories with Buddhist and Eastern philosophical approaches to education. These three aspects are elucidated in detail as follows.

This study draws on Sterling’s (2010) notion of transformative learning, defined by the author as a desirable form of learning in the context of contemporary sustainable education. Sterling describes it as a process where the learners’ epistemological beliefs, value system and critical thinking evolve into a new consciousness of the world and of social and environmental relationships (Sterling, 2010). It is desirable, because learners –through critical thinking and self-reflection- ultimately acquire the ability to envision the possibility to bring about wider paradigm shifts in dealing with environmental issues, vis-à-vis former views on sustainable education which were aimed merely at enabling learners to address problems in their immediate circumstances (Sterling, 2001). This perspective on transformative learning refers to an understanding of ESD beyond the dichotomy of eco- versus anthropo-centric approaches, as it ascribes equal value to both and focuses on the importance of understanding and changing the patterns of the relationships of the individual with the self, society and the environment (Reid and Scott, 2007; Sterling, 2001, 2010). With reference to the study of JGCC, the aforementioned understanding of learning provides a lens through which sustainable learning practices in the community can be captured and analysed thoroughly, to reveal the processes that occur in producing and enacting environmental knowledge.

Furthermore, the relational patterns inherent in the definition of transformative learning are investigated through the use of social learning theories in ESD. These focus on the analysis of the role that power relations play in shaping the relationships between members of the community, and how these translate into their learning and daily practices with the environment (Reid and Scott, 2007; Wals, 2009). Finally, critical thinking theory, Montessori pedagogy and experiential education are related and compared to Buddhist and Eastern philosophies of education, to understand how they manifest in JGCC educational model. The former -drawing on the works of John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Maria Montessori- focus on the holistic development of learners and their cognitive abilities, to foster transformative and dialogical processes through actively and purposefully engaging with their contexts. In the latter, epistemological beliefs that differ from traditional Western conceptions on the nature of the self, of reality, and their relationship –and seen here as intimately interconnected- impact the learners’ perceptions of and interactions with themselves, the environment and society (Skitt, 2003).

Thus, the interplay between the processes of these –different, but complementary- perspectives on education will be analysed in JGCC, to elicit understanding of the results emerging from their combination in relation to the notion of transformative learning. These concepts provide meaningful insights to explore how Western and Eastern knowledge interact in shaping the educational experience of students in JGCC. The comparison between these theoretical perspectives and the practices that manifest in JGCC is also used to outline how the outcomes of this interrelation relate to current ESD pedagogical practices. Interestingly, connections between higher order of learning, social learning and Eastern philosophies of education call attention to a model of sustainable education which extends beyond the school boundaries and teachers/students relationships, to encompass the whole

community and its members as, respectively, educational site and actors. This aspect offers another element of comparison –in terms of institutional arrangements- between Western and Eastern conceptualizations of education in the context of transformative learning, which can positively contribute to widening the understanding and the impact of ESD initiatives.

# Methodology

This proposed research will employ a qualitative interpretive methodology, which is congruous with the epistemological and ontological nature of the information sought in this study. Specifically, it aims to explore how the cognitive and social processes involved in the notion of transformative learning occur and interact in JGCC, and how the participants’ understandings of and perspectives on reality inform their actions. With regard to this last aspect, the experience as a volunteer within the community for one year taught me that adopting a flexible and open-minded approach is of crucial importance. Particularly, awareness about the different epistemological backgrounds between the research participants and the researcher is essential to ensure that the participants’ views are accurately understood and contextualized (Swain, 2006).

In contrast to the common use of traditional case-study methodology in research studies within the ESD literature (Reid and Scott, 2007: Scott and Gough, 2003), this ethnographic approach draws on the literature of anthropology of education (Sarangapani, 2003) to generate data suitable to the critical and reflexive investigation of indigenous epistemological beliefs and values. Ethnographic methods of data gathering and analysis are also specifically apt for gaining thorough understandings of the interactions between the participants’ views and values and Western knowledge, and how these interactions translate into daily practices in JGCC (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; White et al., 2009). Therefore, the relationships developed with the proposed research participants while living in the community in the past and through constant communication via mail and Skype at present, will help me conduct an ethnographic case-study (White et al., 2009), with a period of fieldwork of one year. Participant observation of classroom teaching and experiential activities outside the classroom will be used to bring to light how the processes of learning take place and how they are translated into daily practices. Purposive sampling will be employed to identify the students with whom I will conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews and conversations with a purpose (Schensul, 2012). Furthermore, semi-structured, in-depth interviews and purposeful conversations will be conducted with teachers and community leaders to understand their perspectives on knowledge and learning practices in JGCC. Additional interviews will be scheduled also with local stakeholders, including politicians, Buddhist monks, villagers and international educational experts who contribute to the community, to gather their perspectives on transformative learning in JGCC and its implications for sustainable education policies and practices in the area.

Having spent four years in India, I have gained knowledge of the Hindi language at an elementary level. Therefore, in order to be able to communicate directly with research participants and to ensure that they respond by using the language they are more comfortable with (as, besides the tribal Monpa language, Hindi is the most widely spoken language in the area), I plan to undertake an intensive Hindi course in a local language institution during the first stage of my fieldwork. Members of the community will also be able to help me translate information into the local tribal language (e.g. Monpa language), where necessary.

The use of triangulation techniques, including content analysis of policy documents will substantiate the contextualization of the study into the broader national and international policy framework, to highlight possible links between the lessons learnt from this case-study and their relevance for sustainable education initiatives in India and abroad. The findings emerging from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, as well as field-notes and content analysis of policy documents will be presented in the form of thick descriptions, as an appropriate way to best illustrate the connections emerging between the participants’ and theoretical perspectives, as well as the researcher’s reflective and reflexive processes involved in the analysis and discussion of results (White et al., 2009; Dobson, 1999). Furthermore, dissemination of the findings of this proposed study will include their presentation through other types of written texts which are suitable for consultation from policy makers and other stakeholders in the field, such as publication of journal articles and research papers.

# Timetable

October 2014- December 2015: starting fieldwork in India, subsequent to upgrading. Prior to reaching JGCC for fieldwork, I plan to undertake an intensive course to improve my Hindi language skills in an Indian language institution.

January 2015- March 2015: first stage of fieldwork and data gathering (observation field-notes and interviews). Periodic interaction and discussion with supervisors via Skype and email.

April 2015- May 2015: conceptualization and development of theories in a separate location such as Bombay or Pune, where internet and library access will be available. Periodic interaction and discussion with supervisors via Skype and email.

June 2015- September 2015: second stage of fieldwork and data gathering, with testing of theories (additional field- notes and interviews) and discussion with supervisors via Skype and email.

October 2015- October 2016: interview transcriptions, thematic and content analysis of collected data.

November 2016- September 2017: interpretation and thesis writing. Moreover, during this time, the findings from this study will be disseminated to stakeholders in the field in India and in the UK through presentations and workshops, to promote connections that bear practical impact for improving sustainable education initiatives.

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