



Photo credit: Eduard Müller

## **I Want to Provide People with Opportunities to Learn How to Live More Sustainably. Where Should I Start?**



Erika Reinkendorf

Erika is an economist with over 8 years of experience in managing educational projects in non-profit organizations and collaborating with the public sector in Peru. She is known for her commitment to the sustainable development of vulnerable communities. Currently, she is completing a master's degree in Responsible Management and Sustainable Economic Development at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, where she is developing a documentary on the implementation of sustainability principles in Costa Rican schools as part of her graduation project in collaboration with the Earth Charter.



Instituto Alajuela. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

After working for over 8 years in the education sector, I started to wonder what the next step in my professional career would be. I realized that the challenges presented by the modern world are not being directly addressed by educational systems. How can we educate a generation of citizens who do not normalize wars, who know and fall in love with the idea of living in harmony with nature, and who can adapt to highly changing conditions? These concerns led me to pursue a master's degree in Responsible Management and Sustainable Economic Development at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. My curiosity and passion for education led me to take the Education for Sustainability course, which opened my eyes to a completely new world for me.

### Where did this curiosity lead me?

The course allowed me to understand the origin and need for the concept of sustainability and to analyze the worldview and values that support it. I learned about policies that are driving educational systems towards sustainability. We also investigated various pedagogies that, even before this concept was promoted, already fostered sustainable practices but have unfortunately not yet deeply permeated educational systems, remaining as alternative proposals on the periphery of more traditional education. Finally, I became familiar with practical examples of schools where education for sustainability is being implemented.

And that's where I found the first answers to my concerns: I understood that there are already educational institutions in the world

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whose goals include promoting sustainable development, not only among their students, but throughout the entire educational community. That inspired me to want to learn more. In the course, we had already visited a school that has the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) very present in their learning sessions, and we had read about other cases of schools that apply a whole-institution approach, promoted by UNESCO [1]. That motivated me to want to visit them, see up close how they are doing it, find out if it is possible to apply it in diverse contexts, and find ways to inspire other educational institutions to lose their fear and dare to innovate in the face of the challenges of our times.

I asked our professor Mirian if she could put me in contact with some schools in Costa Rica that she knew were implementing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). She agreed to do so and suggested I record the interviews and make a documentary to share these stories. Thus, I embarked on this journey of discovering the beginning of an educational revolution from 6 schools of different sizes, both private and public, in



CEUNA. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

rural and urban settings, which are transforming their educational institutions to incorporate sustainability principles in a comprehensive manner, from curriculum and pedagogy to infrastructure, governance, and their relationship with the surrounding community, with the intention of not only teaching what sustainability is but living it day by day.

### What did I find?

The first school I visited was the Centro Educativo Universitario Para Niños y Adolescentes (CEUNA), a private school in an urban environment with approximately 150 students from preschool to secondary school, characterized by its educational offer focused on Sustainable Human Development. More than 30 years ago, the school was founded in a former mechanical workshop with almost no vegetation around. After a few years, the directors decided to go through a consultation process where children were asked to imagine their ideal school, and they said they wanted a school with green areas and opportunities to learn outdoors. Thus, in 2000, they made a great effort to take out a loan to buy land that had been a coffee farm, where the campus is now located next to a large forest, which is also part of the school.

As part of their educational proposal, each grade in preschool and primary school is responsible for an environmental project throughout the year. For example, the school has a small farm with chickens and another space for turtles, both cared for by the students; other grades are in charge of



the Mundo en Miniatura project, where they study the insects found in the forest and the hydroponic garden, which grows vegetables that will later be consumed in the school cafeteria. In secondary school, projects are also carried out, led by groups of students from different grades who choose where they will participate throughout the year based on their own interests. The idea is that after going through all the grades, young people become guardians of the environment. Sustainability is part of the school's DNA, and is reflected in their daily life, thanks to the incorporation of the Earth Charter principles as a fundamental part of their philosophy.



CEUNA. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

Then I arrived at La Joya public school, which felt like a dream in a rural area among the mountains. The school has fewer than 50 students, between preschool and primary school, and is a model school where the director has taken the SDGs and Earth Charter principles as inspiration and guidance, and today opens its doors for educators and students from other schools to visit and learn from their experience. In 2018, in collaboration with the municipality, they acquired the

adjoining land and built an ecological park with fruit trees, farm animals, and a garden, which is a source of learning opportunities and where much of the food consumed by the students in the cafeteria is produced.

This school takes advantage of the resources offered by the rural environment and the knowledge of community members. For example, parents helped plant trees in the park, and mothers volunteered to maintain it. They also organize events such as ecological walks, reforestation and recycling campaigns, and karaoke dances to raise awareness in the community and raise funds to help implement and maintain the various initiatives within the school. Finally, thanks to the formation of alliances, they have received support from various institutions such as universities and private companies, whose contributions allow them to expand the resources available in the ecological park.



Escuela la Joya. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf



Escuela la Joya. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

The third school I visited was Humboldt-Schule, a German international school with students from preschool to secondary school. This is a private urban educational institution with funding and certain guidelines from Germany, with a focus oriented towards sciences without neglecting the humanistic orientation. Interestingly, children have philosophy classes from the 1st grade and learn to question and develop critical thinking from an early age. They are also given space to organize actions led by themselves, such as talks on topics of interest to them or fundraising campaigns to donate to different causes they decide to support.

Humboldt's sustainability initiative, like the other schools interviewed, is motivated by the Costa Rican government's Ecological Blue Flag Programme [2]. For several consecutive years, they have achieved the five stars, which is the highest recognition of the programme by implementing environmental management and education actions. However, they do not want to stop

at the 5 stars but seek to go further and involve students and school staff in the process. For example, as a result of the Earth Charter online certificate attended by the coordinators of the school's Environment and Blue Flag committees, they are implementing a change agents club where primary school students will receive support to put into practice initiatives that drive environmental and social changes.



Humboldt-Schule. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf



The next school I visited, Escuela José Cubero Muñoz, is a classic public school in an urban area with some budget constraints and some restrictions from having to comply with Ministry of Education guidelines, such as not being able to easily organize educational trips. Even so, they have also received 5 stars on the Blue Flag Programme and are part of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network [3]. Both networks serve as a guide and source of inspiration for the school, as they can learn about good practices shared by other educational associated institutions.

Some of the practices they have implemented, thanks to the Blue Flag Programme's momentum, include rainwater harvesting, as it is an abundant resource at certain times of the year; recycling plastic, paper, and glass, which are the most generated waste in the school; and including environmental education transversally in different school projects. Besides environmental issues, they also seek to include traditional Costa Rican culture and indigenous communities in different subjects.



Escuela Jose Cubero Muñoz. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

On the other hand, the Alajuela Institute is also a public educational center in an urban environment with approximately 2,100 students, which has modern infrastructure and large green spaces. This is also part of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network, which allows them to receive training, learn from other experiences, and feel supported along the way. For example, this year, they want to implement a Mother Earth classroom, where they seek to recognize nature as a teacher. This is thanks to an initiative led by the Asociación para la Niñez y su Ambiente (ANIA), which, in collaboration with UNESCO, helps schools create spaces where students can form a close bond with nature.

At the Alajuela Institute, young people are also empowered to suggest and organize actions managed by themselves. A few months ago, they conducted a campaign to plant 200 trees, led by the student council, involving many students from all over secondary school. In that process, the students managed to form an alliance with the University of Costa Rica, through which they received the donation of trees and advice on which species would be best for reforesting the area. The University also committed to maintaining the trees over the next few years.

Finally, I arrived at San Francisco de Peñas Blancas, an exemplary public school with preschool and primary students that began very small with only 2 classrooms. Thanks to being located on the way to a popular touristy area, they took advantage of the interest of tourists who wanted to visit the school. This resulted in the generation of



funds, and at the same time, increased the children interest in learning English. Thanks to that opportunity, they managed to contact an international foundation, with which they formed an alliance that helped them with donations to build additional classrooms and acquire computers. The parents of the school volunteered to create the Tierra Prometida Organic Integral Farm. San Francisco School has been recognized as a carbon-neutral school due to the use of renewable energies such as solar panels and a biodigester. There are no garbage containers in the school, only recycling containers for materials that can be reused or converted into compost.

This school clearly has an integrative vision of Education for Sustainable Development, which is evidenced not only in the daily practice of sustainable actions but also in the execution of specific projects that include the leadership of students, teachers, and directors. Different subject learning sessions are held on the farm since it serves as an open classroom where projects are developed in a hands-on manner. They have also created a cooperative, which is like a mini bank for development, where the students themselves sell products and finance investments for the school and philanthropic projects. Additionally, students develop their own sustainable businesses, becoming entrepreneurs from a very young age.

## Final Reflections

Throughout this journey through innovative schools, I was surprised to see that there is no single formula for carrying out education



Escuela San Francisco. Photo credit: Erika Reinkendorf

committed to sustainability; rather, each institution has the possibility of implementing its own plan according to the resources available and the most relevant problems of its environment. What I can highlight, in most cases, is that putting sustainability principles [4] into practice is totally aligned with any action seeking to increase educational quality. Schools that take into account students' opinions, motivate them to question, take them out of the classroom to explore and learn from the various opportunities the environment offers, encourage them to undertake, seek creative solutions, and collaborate with other people, and organizations are definitely spaces where citizens are being formed who will be prepared to face the challenges of the world we live in.

These schools dared to be pioneers in incorporating a new mentality into their institutions. It doesn't matter if the school is public or private, urban or rural, with many or few resources, when it finds a dedicated and committed leadership team with a vision, they can go beyond their limits. In



many cases, they have achieved this with the help of organizations that promote this change from different areas, such as those previously mentioned: the Costa Rican government's Blue Flag Ecological Programme, the UNESCO Associated Schools Network, the courses and training offered by the Earth Charter, and the NGO ANIA. All these efforts coincide in that the values and principles of sustainability cannot be taught theoretically but are internalized when put into practice because it involves a change in our current lifestyles. Finally, I am convinced that it is possible to educate for the transformation our society requires, so let's not be afraid to start doing so.

## Notes

[1] "A whole-institution approach suggests the incorporation of sustainable development not only through the aspects of the curriculum, but also through an integrated management and governance of the institution, the application of a sustainability ethos, engagement of community and stakeholders, long-term planning, and sustainability monitoring and evaluation" (UNESCO, 2017).

[2] The Blue Flag Ecological Programme for Educational Centers aims to "promote a culture of sustainability in educational centers that allows for the generation of environmentally friendly practices and strengthens the learning processes of students" (MEP, 2023).

[3] 3 "The UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) connects more than 12,000 schools in 182 countries around a common goal to build peace in the minds of children and young people. Through concrete actions member schools promote the ideals of UNESCO valuing rights and dignity, gender equality, social progress, freedom, justice and democracy, respect for diversity and international solidarity. The

Network operates at international and national levels with three clear priorities: education for sustainable development, global citizenship education and intercultural and heritage learning" (UNESCO, 2024).

[4] ESD is characterized by being a learning process that is: Experiential, active, practical; Participatory; Oriented towards collective action; Contextual and meaningful (locally relevant and culturally appropriate); That allows for clarifying, questioning, and examining the values that guide and should guide our actions, decisions, and lifestyles; Collaborative and inclusive; Flexible (fostering the ability to constantly adapt); That stimulates critical thinking; That fosters a vision of the future and creativity" (Jiménez et al., 2021).

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