

# Together-telling as a means to share cultural perspectives in Education for Sustainable Development

A study from Greenland

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## **Abstract**

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered one of the paths leading towards a sustainable future. However, work in ESD must be responsive to the local context and culture in order to be accepted by the people involved. This article examines how together-telling can be used as a means for collaborative future-making in ESD. By reflecting on cultural differences in nature relationships and manners of communication, together-telling is suggested as an approach to give space to voices other than those dominating the global sustainability narratives. The focus is on a respectful way of bringing together and learning from different perspectives of Western-European and Arctic Indigenous cultures in the context of sustainability. A study from Greenland is used as an example from an Indigenous culture in Northern Europe.

**Keywords** Education for Sustainable Development, Greenland, Indigenous knowledge, together-telling

## Introduction

Education is a precondition for empowering people to contribute to a sustainable future. This was posited in the 'Agenda 21' of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UNESCO 1992) and led to the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The purpose of ESD is quality education that "provides the values, knowledge, skills and competencies for sustainable living and participation in society and decent work" (UNESCO 2009, 118).

Despite good intentions, the role of ESD is not without criticism. One point is the dominance of Western values in the context of ESD. For example, the competences that ESD communicates are based on the interests of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (Rychen 2008). Since these values have contributed to the present non-sustainable way of living, it is questioned how the same values could support an education that is supposed to pave the way for a sustainable future (Malone, Truong, and Gray 2017). With reference to the "competencies of integrative thinking and practice" (Rieckmann 2018, 38ff), educators are encouraged to reflect on the importance of different perspectives and cultural values in the context of sustainability when working with ESD.

This article explores how perspectives from people of different cultural backgrounds can be shared and integrated in ESD. The focus is on Arctic Indigenous and Western-European perspectives on human-nature relationships and traditions in communication. A case-study in Greenland is used to elaborate and add discussion to this topic.

Modern Greenland is shaped by traditional Inuit culture, the influence of Western-European missionaries, Danish-Norwegian colonialism (Powell 2016, 200-216), and more recently by globalization and digitalization like other countries in the world. The educational system in Greenland mostly follows Danish teaching traditions. Nevertheless, little is found on the implementation of ESD in Greenland, in contrast to numerous studies in other Nordic countries (Jucker and Mathar 2015). Since ESD is concerned with the production of knowledge, along with skills and competences (de Haan 2008, 23-43), the origin of the knowledge going into ESD should be examined critically. In countries that have experienced colonialization, e.g., Greenland, voices of misgivings are heard that education and knowledge can be misused as measures for neo-co-

lonialism (Markussen 2017). The critique is that ideas and actions are imposed without considering Indigenous knowledge. Danielziek (2013) holds the opinion that ESD can contribute to the consolidation of global power relationships. Being aware of the risk of Eurocentrism in ESD, educators should strengthen competences that support the understanding of different perspectives (Schreiber and Siege 2016, 39).

In this article, oral storytelling, is suggested as a means in ESD to embrace Indigenous and Western mindsets with respect and equality, giving space to all voices. Storytelling is a traditional, cultural practice in the history of humankind (Campell and Moyers 2001). In cultures without writing, the principles of behavior and coexistence were passed on by oral storytelling, including expressive performances (Merkel 2015, 45). In modern education, various forms of oral story-based work are being applied. Gersie, Nanson, and Schieffelin (2022, 22) describe this as a continuum between the two main modes of “performance-oriented storytelling” and various forms of “applied storytelling”. They all have in common that they take advantage of the effect of stories to support narrative thinking, create emotions, engage people’s imagination, give orientation in a complex world, and allow people to share experiences (Harding 2009, 91, 93; Breithaupt 2022). The sharing of personal, authentic stories means that the experiences of one person can become the experiences of others (Breithaupt 2022, 10). This can convey a feeling of connectedness. Similarly, describing values and thoughts by stories allows a more friendly exchange than a direct articulation of opposite points of views. This is suggested to be useful even in sensitive contexts such as peacebuilding (Nanson 2021, 60). Hence, when coming from different cultural backgrounds, the sharing of personal stories can contribute to a better mutual understanding.

## Methods

In the present study, two cultural aspects were included: i) nature relationship – because the view on nature is a central aspect in the understanding of sustainability (Choy 2017), and ii) modes of communication – because communication is important when bringing together diverse or even contradictory perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in Greenland using qualitative reconstructive research (Bohnsack 2010). In addition to this, litera-

ture research and results from a study by Ritter and Larsen (2023) on human-nature relationships, including interviews with Greenlandic Inuit and with Sami people in Northern Norway, were used to gain information on Indigenous views on nature.

| Code | Interviewees   | Approx. age | Interview Language |
|------|--|-------------|--------------------|
| A    | Greenlandic Inuit, female, doctoral student of social sciences, Nuuk           | 20-25       | Danish             |
| B    | Greenlandic Inuit, female, historian, Nuuk                                     | 30-35       | Danish             |
| C    | Greenlandic Inuit, male, master student of archaeology, Nuuk                   | 20-25       | English            |
| D    | Dane, male, lecturer educational studies, living in Greenland since 2002, Nuuk | 40-45       | Danish             |
| E    | Dane, male, teacher, living in Greenland since 1986, Qaqortoq                  | 60-64       | Danish             |

Tab. 1: Interviewees of the expert interviews, conducted in October 2019.

The semi-structured expert interviews were carried out as guideline-based interviews (Kruse 2014, 166 ff) in October 2019. Key experts were selected as persons from the educational or the cultural-historical sector in Greenland. They were Greenlandic Inuit or Danes who had a long period of work and residence in Greenland (see Table 1), presenting different cultural backgrounds to embrace the diversity of perspectives to be shared in the context of ESD. The analysis of the interviews was carried out using qualitative content analysis by Gläser and Laudel (2009; 2013) supported by the software MIA ([www.laudel.info/downloads/mia/](http://www.laudel.info/downloads/mia/)).

## Results

### Nature Relationship

For all interviewed Greenlandic Inuit, the contact with nature has been of great importance since their childhood. It was supported by their parents and family members. They ascribe to it feelings of great freedom and possibilities to learn about local nature. “My parents, my uncles, and aunts, they wanted us to be outside, you know because it’s important to be around in nature” (Greenlander C). The adults allowed the children to roam in nature freely. But they also accompanied them to explain what they met in nature.

Greenlander A spoke about dog sled tours with her father. On these tours, she learned to be aware of the forces and dangers of nature. Her father strongly encouraged her always to observe the weather and the landscape closely. “There is simply a big respect for the forces of nature regarding the weather, and where we were. My father has always expected that I observe our route, all the time, to be able to find my way back if the weather would turn. That was kind of a profound respect for our surroundings.” (Greenlander A).

A profound knowledge of nature, communicated through generations, pointing to environmental changes being observed more quickly. The people adjust their behavior to avoid dangerous situations. Greenlander C talked about his hometown Upernavik, where families used to go ice-fishing at a certain spot. One year, several people had broken through the ice and died, because the ice had been thin due to warmer winters. Since then, this spot has been avoided by the locals. Ritter and Larsen (2023) met similar statements in their interviews in Greenland that support this respect of the forces of nature. One male Greenlander said: “In my childhood, we lost many family members to nature. They drowned or had accidents in the mountains when hunting. That’s just the way it was.” The reaction of this man was to be more careful and aware of risks when being out in nature himself.

A close contact with nature and its forces have formed a holistic view on nature in the Inuit culture that differs from the one dominant in Europe. Traditionally, all the world is animate, and a vital force (spirit or soul) exists in all animals, plants, humans and stones, lakes or mountains (Berlo and Philipps 1998, 161). The Greenlander B said in the interview that “nature is dangerous. Nature is something that must be respected. And it is very much animated (inspired). (...) Nature itself, but also every single animal or thing. Everything is turning into something living.” According to her, this view on nature can still be seen among people. It differs compared to other, Western cultures. In Denmark, she says, nature would be personified as a beautiful, young mother, fragile, with long, blond curls and flowers in her hair. In Greenland, however, nature is cantankerous and could kill at any time. There are dangerous forces that must be respected and from which humans must protect themselves. And above all, nature cannot be mechanized. “If nature

doesn't want Greenlandic potatoes to grow, there won't be Greenlandic potatoes. Finished." (Greenlander B).

The opinion of Dane D illustrates the conflict of different cultural perspectives on 'understanding' nature. He states: „Biologists struggle because there is a lack of understanding of what it means to work biologically, scientifically in many places in Greenland. They [local hunters] think that their knowledge is better. Although they can see that the fish are getting smaller and smaller.“

### **Modes of communication**

In the Greenlandic culture, oral traditions were crucial for the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. A written language was first introduced by the missionaries, and then spread quickly. Before that, knowledge, social rules, and taboos were communicated by stories and myths, drum dance and song feasts that can be traced back more than 4.500 years. Missionaries tried to forbid this tradition. Dane E explains that the introduction of television in the last century furthermore influenced this oral communication of knowledge when a hunter, coming home from his trip, no longer talked about his experiences but turned on the TV. “This meant that the stories of where to find the animals and what to be aware of on a hunting trip, they were no longer as present for the next generation as before.” (Dane E). Other interviewees pointed out the importance of the oral tradition and expressed their wish to keep it alive:

“Things were passed on by stories from generation to generation. And knowledge, traditional knowledge, has been passed on by traditional education, by myths, stories, and sagas. I think it is important to keep this tradition alive at school. These are the cultural roots of the society we live in.” (Greenlander B)

The influence of traditional storytelling can still be found in modern ghost stories that are told in Greenland today. Originally, the purpose of ghost stories was to communicate a respect of the forces of nature. Today, this is reduced to: Whatever happens - accept it. “Don't mess with it” as Greenlander B said. In a scary situation, one walks away and under no circumstances investigates the cause:

"[...] You're supposed to respect that, and then you're just supposed to leave it alone. You should -- *don't mess with it*. Whereas in Hollywood or in the European narrative tradition, there is always an explanation. In the end, someone calls a priest or an exorcist or something like that. There is a solution. --- Here [in Greenland] --- you just -- you just shouldn't interfere." (Greenlander B)

Furthermore, the interviews revealed another cultural aspect that should be considered in ESD: the difference between Greenlandic and Danish modes of communication with respect to the culture of discussion. According to Greenlander B, the culture of discussion does not traditionally exist in Greenland: „We don't discuss. End.“ In the traditional society, it was not possible to live with inconsistencies. “Something like disagreeing with your friends or not being able to agree on one thing or the other puts everything out of balance and creates insecurity in a society.” (Greenlander B). Even today, because towns are small and isolated, one cannot get out of the way of others. It is therefore customary to put away disagreements rather than discuss them:

“You can't just walk to Paamiut [town south of Nuuk] if you don't want to see the people here anymore. [...] You still have to look at them across the freezer in the supermarket during the day, so you have no choice but to get along with the people you don't agree with in some way. Otherwise, you must be really serious in your dispute.” (Greenlander B)

Lidegaard (1993), in his book on the Christianization of Greenlandic Inuit, describes this as an experience of the missionaries. When Hans Egede introduced Christianity in Greenland at the beginning of the 18th century and called it „the only truth“, he naturally contradicted the views of the Inuit. In doing so, he made a very rude and inconsiderate impression, as it was considered tactless for the Inuit to openly contradict others (Lidegaard 1993, 38). This can remind us of situations between scientists and local people today, as described by Dane D.

Asking for one's opinion is also considered rude in the eyes of Greenlander B. During her studies in Denmark, it was unpleasant for her to be asked by her fellow students about her opinion of a topic:

"I thought it was -- so uncomfortable. Especially when it got personal, when they wanted to know why you believed in this or why you were advocating that. I couldn't understand it at all. I was like, 'What does it matter to you?' It's totally rude to ask something like that!" (Greenlander B).

According to Greenlander B, it is uncomfortable for a Greenlander to be criticized. A discussion is easily taken personally. „Partly because we're bad at debating, and partly because we're all related. As soon as someone criticizes you or questions your opinion or your suggestion or whatever, it feels like a personal attack“. Although she has learned to debate from her experiences in Denmark and now sees the meaning of it, it is still alien to her.

## Discussion

The statements of the interviewees reveal differences between views on nature in the Greenlandic and the Western-European culture. The European view on nature has emerged under the influence of the Enlightenment and Romantic eras. According to the ideas of the Enlightenment, the world can be accessed through rationality (rationalism) and knowledge (empiricism). Nature is seen as mechanized, as something that can be calculated and steered (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994, 13). In the Enlightenment, man placed himself above nature; he thought he could even improve nature (Taylor 2017, 62).

This is not the case for the Indigenous perspective in Greenland. Here, nature and its components are considered to possess a spiritual essence, although today less than in the original animism of the Thule culture (moving from Canada to Greenland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Glann noted about East Greenland: "The Greenlanders believe that all things are souled, and also that the smallest implement possesses its soul. Thus, an arrow, a boot, a shoe sole or a key, a drill, has each for itself a soul" (Glann, in Weyer 1932: 300). The belief in an animated nature was still found in mod-



ern Greenland by Sowa (2014) in a study on indigeneity and ecology in Greenland. Sowa defined four positions of views on nature among Greenlandic Inuit: i) *traditionalistic*, ii) *intermediate*, iii) *emancipatory*, and iv) *hedonistic-collectively*. A person with a *traditionalistic position* believes in natural spirits. This belief can exist parallel to the person's scientific knowledge or way of thinking. This is different to the Western culture where science and logic are said to have caused the loss of a belief in an animated nature.

The Greenlandic relationship to nature, as indicated in the interviews, is not about control or determination, but rather about the acceptance of nature's limits and forces. Nature can be lethal. However, this risk is not dramatized. A similar attitude was expressed by Indigenous Sami people interviewed by Ritter and Larsen (2023). People have learned to accept that nature can be tough:

“There are not given any explanations for the killing forces of nature. It's just that 'that's how it is'. There are storms. And it is actually the case that someone drowns under the ice. These are dramatic things that are happening. But it is something that is accepted. We cannot do anything about it, we have to accept it. (...) It's like an acceptance that nature is tough. It's not just beauty". (Sami educator and researcher, in Ritter and Larsen 2023, 66)

People try to minimize the risk by avoiding certain situations, by an increased attention, or by having the right equipment when being in nature. In the Western culture, nature's limits are constantly pushed. Knowledge and planning mechanisms are used to cope with nature's forces, and technology like Geo-engineering is considered as a means to improve or amend nature. It is not human beings that adjust to the rules of nature, but nature is adjusted to human needs.

There can be value in bringing together and learning from both approaches, e.g., accepting limits where necessary but understanding causes for a change in natural processes and adjusting to them where possible. This can be fruitful for coping with the challenges to be met in the face of environmental changes (Weizsäcker and Wijkman 2019, 181ff). Western insights have started the sustainability debate, but a dialogue about Indigenous values can make an important contribution to global rethinking (Rychen and Salganik

2003). A Sami doctoral student and nature guide, interviewed by Ritter and Larsen (2023), described how she communicates this to her students:

“When you meet people from other cultures, you have to remember that the Western mindset is not the only correct one. There are many more ways to see nature and be in it. And it’s not always about overcoming nature: ‘You have to go up a mountain and conquer it. You have to be stronger than the mountains.’ Some traditional cultures say you shouldn’t go up the mountain because it’s dangerous. We Sami understand that nature has forces, dangerous forces. So, it’s like two different ways of looking at nature”. (Sami doctoral student and nature guide, in Ritter and Larsen, 2023, 65).

### Together-telling

Given the fact that debating is not common culture in Greenland, together-telling is suggested as a better way of communication in ESD to promote a mutual understanding of Indigenous and Western perspectives. Together-telling, as introduced by Larsen, Boje, and Bruun (2021) as part of the True Storytelling method, is inspired by Indigenous peoples’ storytelling traditions. It is about sharing different sides of living stories within a group, together with a joint reflection on the values associated with them (Rosile, Boje, and Claw 2018, 310; Larsen, Boje, and Bruun 2021, xx). The approach also focuses on the material importance of storytelling, e.g., the interplay of material conditions, practices, places, and meanings (Rosile, Boje, and Claw 2018, 316). This makes it well-applicable to questions related to nature.

Together-telling works with personal, authentic stories. Authentic stories can create associations with situations the listener can identify with; others show new possibilities or can give inspiration (Breithaupt 2022, 18). The stories shared are not meant to follow a static beginning-middle-end. They follow a dynamic process by weaving stories together, building “living webs of multiple stories” (Rosile et al. 2021, 381). This leads to a new story not based on the values of one dominating perspective but created through the intertwining narratives of the group. It helps to find a common ground.

No criticism or advice is given to the speaker. Rather, the listeners react to one story with another story. The approach avoids the dualism of one-many, in favor of the concept of “multiplicity” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). It gives an alternative to hierarchical thinking and interacting. This can help to articulate opposing perspectives more easily in a group, e.g., traditional and scientific knowledge. Instead of incomprehension and critique, insight is given into the other group’s perspectives. Hence, when Western perspectives are met with skepticism by Greenlandic Inuit, the stories of the Indigenous people can help explain their doubts. Similarly, Western educators can react with their stories, without taking a dominant position.

Furthermore, using storytelling in ESD supports the oral tradition in Greenland. The Greenlandic interviewees expressed their interest in preserving the oral tradition, but not at the expense of education and modern knowledge. In conjunction with ESD, new stories from contemporary life could be used to address current issues of sustainable development.

## Conclusion

ESD should enhance transformative thinking, thereby supporting sustainable development. Transformative thinking presupposes that different perspectives are known and connected. For educators in ESD, it also means being aware of the dominance of Western values in the educational concept and the concept of sustainability. This study suggests together-telling as a means in ESD for bringing together Arctic Indigenous and Western-European perspectives in an equal and respectful manner. Some of the findings are specific to Greenlandic conditions; others are universally valid for diverse cultural and socio-cultural groups.

By using together-telling in ESD, different views of nature can be shared, avoiding hierarchal thinking. The strength of this approach is to give space to different voices. At the same time, it moves away from the Western way of debating personal opinions which is not rooted in the Greenlandic culture. By doing this, ESD stimulates a learning group to consider multiple approaches to sustainable challenges. Applied like this, storytelling can become a useful instrument in the toolbox of ESD, strengthening the process of learning from each other. This takes time and might not be

achieved within one ESD session. But once this basis has been created, different perspectives can be brought together and lead to insight and understanding.

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