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Reimagining Sustainability Through Freirean Communication Praxis: A Study of Dialogical and Decolonial Approaches in Indonesian Schools

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability communication is not only about delivering environmental information, but also has a connection with meaning, power, and awareness. The global discourse on sustainable development is often influenced by Western technocratic paradigms that can ignore local knowledge and cultural context. This study analyses the implementation of communication in schools can be a dialogical space to increase ecological awareness based on local values. This study uses qualitative case studies in two secondary schools in East Java, namely Adiwiyata school and a maritime-based school, where data is compiled with observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of school communication materials. Based on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, communication is understood as a dialogical process that shows reflection with action so that participants can conduct repeated analyses of the global sustainability narrative. The results indicate that communication in schools is participatory, contextual, and culturally attached. Teachers and students have negotiated sustainability messages with local languages and symbols, with joint actions. This research can be concluded that dialogical communication can be a decolonial action that can restore the justice of knowledge and increase sustainability based on culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is often widely implemented in several countries, including Indonesia. However, in its implementation, it still often

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has a technocratic and normative nature, because it focuses more on the dissemination of information than on the formation of critical awareness (Astuti et al., 2025). UNESCO (2024) reports that although more than 70% of member countries have included ESD in the national curriculum, only 37% have successfully incorporated participatory and reflective elements into the educational process. In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry indicates that of the more than 20,000 schools that have been registered in the Adiwiyata environmental education program, only 12% have achieved "independent" status. These results indicate that sustainability is still often interpreted as instrumental to knowledge in learning rather than a social praxis that can change mindsets and behaviours.

Communication in sustainability education not only conveys messages, but also shapes the way a person thinks, acts, and understands their relationship with nature (Abuzeinab et al., 2025). Golob et al. (2023) indicate that sustainability communication is a social implementation that improves reality by supporting shared change. Stănescu et al. (2022) indicate that effective communication must be participatory, dialogical, and transformative. However, in its implementation, it is often still in one direction, namely teachers indicate that students listen with limited dialogue (Blotta & Brianezi, 2024). This results in students viewing sustainability as abstract scientific knowledge far removed from their life experiences.

A decolonial perspective that offers an alternative way of looking at rethinking sustainability communication (Nguyen, 2025). Bauwens et al. (2026) indicate that decolonial education needs to open up space for local knowledge, historical experiences, and marginalised group narratives. This framework is reinforced by Freire's pedagogy that rejects the "banking" model and focuses on a dialogical education based on praxis (Freire, 1970). The concept *of conscientisation* encourages critical awareness of social and environmental issues. In line with that, environmental education turns learning into a practice that builds ecological awareness as well as social justice.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the analysis of this is constantly evolving, there is still a theoretical and empirical gap. Most research focuses more on policies, curriculum, or student behaviour, but rarely sees schools as a communication space where global sustainability discourse is negotiated with local values from a decolonial view (Stein et al., 2023). To fill this gap, this research has offered two contributions. Conceptually, this study, it combines pedagogy critically with decolonial communication in order to understand sustainability communication as a social praxis that forms ecological awareness. Empirically, this study analyses two schools in Indonesia that are Adiwiyata schools and schools whose base is maritime, becoming a dialogical space where the narrative of global sustainability is re-analysed through local culture.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does sustainability communication function as a form of decolonial praxis that fosters ecological conscientisation among students?

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative dual case study design involving two secondary schools in East Java which are Adiwiyata schools and maritime-based schools. The two schools were chosen purposively because they both implement sustainability-oriented educational programs, but are in an environmental context with different cultures.

Data were obtained by observing the participants, conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and analysing various documents such as school environment programs, posters, and digital media content. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis method (Neuman Lawrence, 2013), which included the process of coding, grouping, and forming themes. The interpretation of the research results is based on the concept of dialogue and awareness proposed by Freire, as well as a decolonial approach to justice in knowledge and the diversity of knowledge systems. Data triangulation is applied to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication Patterns and Ecological Conscientisation

The results of the interview revealed that students considered dialogical communication as a meaningful experience in building closeness to the environment. Especially in schools that are based on maritime interactions, discussions with the local community provide an emotional impact that makes students feel more connected to the sea. One of the students indicated that conversations with fishermen made climate change easier to understand when compared to explanations in textbooks. Meanwhile, students at Adiwiyata school revealed that reflective activities help them review their daily habits in the environment. These results indicate that sustainability communication becomes more effective when knowledge is linked to personal and shared experiences.

The process of forming ecological awareness can be seen in both schools with different approaches. In Adiwiyata's own school, students' reflection on environmental issues emerges through forums such as Green Dialogue, while in maritime schools, understanding develops from storytelling experiences and direct interaction with coastal communities. The teacher added that learning not only focuses on environmental concepts, but also opens up space for students' emotional expression of conditions such as polluted rivers and ecosystem changes. This communication pattern reflects Freire's *problem-posing education* approach, which places students as active participants in knowledge formation (Cam & Ballantine, 2026).

Therefore, communication in both schools has an important role in the process of helping students negotiate the meaning of the environment, as shown in Table 1, by increasing critical ecological awareness.

Table 1
Comparative communication models in sustainability education

Appearence	Supernatural School	Maritime-Based School
Communication Pattern	Structured and formal; teacher as facilitator of reflection	Horizontal and participatory; collaboration among teachers, students, and local community
Primary Media	Posters, environmental presentations, reflection forums	Digital videos, storytelling, and community-based campaigns
Core Values	Discipline, cleanliness, individual responsibility	Maritime wisdom, ocean spirituality, ecological solidarity
Forms of Participation	Weekly discussions and school-based environmental projects	Digital content production and coastal conservation activities
Main Challenges	Administrative bureaucracy and limited time for reflection	Resource constraints and lack of institutional support

Negotiating Global and Local Sustainability Discourses

The school in this study is seen to have a function as a meeting room for global sustainability discourse and local cultural values. At Adiwiyata school, where the environmental message is *Go Green* and *Save the Planet* does not stand alone but is collaborated with cultural elements, for example, using batik motifs, traditional symbols, and community values. Teachers have explained that the use of cultural references makes environmental messages easier to understand because students are closer to their experiences.

The understanding of sustainability in maritime schools is greatly influenced by the proximity of students to coastal life and the traditions they experience daily. The expression *Menjaga Laut, Menjaga Hidup* not only has a function as a slogan, but also a representation of cultural values in marine conservation. Cultural practices such as *petik laut* are also included in environmental learning, so that sustainability is understood as an integration between the ecological dimension and socio-cultural responsibility.

Communication also facilitates the revitalisation of local ecological knowledge (Weder & Stranzl, 2025). This result encourages a decolonial view that emphasises the importance of acknowledging some form of knowledge (Bonatti et al., 2025). As a substitute, positioning science as the most superior in both schools provides space for local knowledge with real experience to coexist with the global sustainability narrative. Therefore, sustainability education becomes a process of cultural translation when students analyse global concepts with local meanings and values.

The involvement of students in dialogical communication also strengthens their emotional relationship with the surrounding environment. When personal experience is positioned as part of the learning process, students more easily undertake the development of a meaningful ecological identity. As illustrated in Figure 1, this process is supported by the interaction of dialogue, reflection, action, meaning negotiation, participation, collaboration, cultural identity, and epistemic justice, which collectively shape ecological conscientisation. This finding is in line with Patel (2023), who focuses on the importance of empathy-based communication in environmental education in the digital era. In general, ecological awareness in both schools is not formed automatically, but rather through a process of communication with a reflective, collaborative, and culture-based nature, which connects global discourse with the local context of students.



Figure 1. Conceptual model of dialogical-cool communication

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that sustainability communication in schools extends beyond the transmission of environmental information and functions as a dialogical and decolonial praxis through which ecological awareness is constructed. The findings reveal that both the Adiwiyata school and the maritime-based school create communicative spaces where students, teachers, and local communities negotiate global sustainability discourses through dialogue, participation, and cultural reflection. Rather than passively receiving environmental knowledge, students reinterpret sustainability through local values, experiences, and ecological traditions, resulting in the development of ecological conscientisation. The study further shows that communication practices grounded in local culture, community engagement, and digital participation contribute to epistemic justice by recognising local knowledge as a legitimate source of environmental understanding. Despite challenges related to institutional constraints and technocratic evaluation systems, sustainability communication remains a powerful mechanism for connecting global environmental concerns with local realities. These findings suggest that fostering ecological consciousness requires educational communication that is participatory, culturally embedded, and reflective, thereby positioning schools as important sites for transformative sustainability learning and social change.

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