

Values-based Education for Sustainable Development:

Building a Pedagogical Framework for the Education of Sustainable Development using a Values-based Education Approach



The VbESD Framework: A Summary

As of September 11th, 2021

By Vicky Huang

For a more digestible format, please see the presentation version of the VbESD Framework here: [Introduction to VbESD - Presentation.pdf](#)

Introduction

Dear reader,

I am honoured to introduce you to the Values-based Education for Sustainable Development working model and framework.

This framework is based off the model of Values-based Education, which underpins educational environments with universal positive values such as kindness, respect, joy, courage, hope, integrity, and love. This model has transformed education all around the world and has become a global movement for quality, inclusive, and deeply-impactful education.

Please know that this is the early stages of a working model, and some parts are more developed than otherwise. This working model will undergo many revisions and consultations with different communities and groups before it is presented as an implementable model.

With no further ado, let me introduce an overview of the 8 pillars of the VbESD framework. Please note that this framework is presented in the context of VbESD in **primary schools**.

The Pillars of Values-based Education for Sustainable Development

The following pillars of Values-based Education for Sustainable Development are adopted from the 7 pillars of Values-based Education: **Modelling, Inner Curriculum, Reflection, Atmosphere & Ethos, Curriculum, Leadership and Ethical Vocabulary**. In VbESD, there is one additional pillar of Sustainable school operations, spelling out “MIRACLES”. Below are descriptions of how each pillar can look like for a primary school practicing VbESD, relating VbE to ESD for a sustainable world.

Pillar 1: Modelling

Modelling refers to the modelling of behaviours that the staff and students display, which leads each value by example. Schools practicing VbESD will not only model the values they choose within a VbE framework, but will all have the additional value of sustainability that grounds all of the other values. This means that all staff within a VbESD school model sustainable behaviours and relate their actions back to sustainability, thus also including sustainability-related language in their day-to-day conversations. Modelling sustainable behaviours include recycling, reducing waste, reusing resources, being energy-conscious and water-conscious, using recycled/recyclable/reusable items such as bags, bottles, containers, utensils, and more. The added modelling of sustainability in this pillar within VbESD does not mean that staff are expected to lead a perfect example of sustainable behaviours; it is simply bringing more explicit attention to achievable and feasible behaviours when possible.

This pillar works very much hand-in-hand with other pillars, such as Ethical Vocabulary and Sustainable School Operations, which will be described in more detail below.

Pillar 2: Inner Curriculum

This pillar is all about honing self-awareness and self-regulation. When we can control our inner world, we learn how to better navigate the outer world, because internal peace radiates outward. Values-based Education operates with the belief that at the core of every individual is an authentic, inner essence, that is not bogged down or locked by negative and limiting experiences. Values-based educators use activities to attune their students to their internal world and the opportunity to explore within and give that attention to themselves instead of their outside environment. When values-based educators connect with and relate to their pupils, they relate from heart to heart, instead of what’s on the external front.

In that similar way, the VbESD framework draws on this Inner Curriculum to cut through the main barriers of sustainability such as convenience, instant gratification, materialism, and excessive consumption by relating straight to the heart and the essence of an individual as well as attuning to their core desires. Indeed, just as the VbE Inner Curriculum leads to the flourishing of humanity, the VbESD Inner Curriculum leads to the flourishing of both humanity and the environment.

Pillar 3: Reflection

In Values-based Education schools, there is dedicated time each day for either guided or unguided reflection, a calm and peaceful time where students have the opportunity to be present to themselves and actively taught how to sit still in a relaxed, comfortable manner and in purposeful silence or visualizations. The VbESD framework takes the existing pillar of Reflection from the VbE model and imbeds the value of sustainability within it, by connecting the reflections and visualizations to sustainability. This is done by adding in prompts and visualizations for how each value relates back to a more sustainable, peaceful, better world. During reflection time, students can be not simply guided through visualizing the value at hand and being present to their thoughts, they can also be guided through how that value shows itself as a crucial element to a better world. The students are then invited to imagine a world where that value is abundant, and where they and the people and community around them are all practicing that value. They can be led to imagine such a world, and with that, foster their self-motivation as well as optimistic thinking and action that lies at the core of the Reflection pillar.

An example of incorporating sustainability into Reflection time

Within the online videos that are presented on the Values-based Education website, the third Online Training video is on “Reflection”, where Bridget Knight explains her “painting with words” methodology for values-based visualizations. In her training, she walks through a script for a guided reflection on the value of Courage.

Sustainability can easily be incorporated within that reflection by relating how courage is needed for a sustainable world and sustainable behaviours. There are infinite possibilities for how this can look like, but some questions that educators can ask themselves to develop a script can include: How does people living this value make the world a better place? How can people living this value promote environmental, social, or economic sustainability? How can people living this value advance the Sustainable Development Goals? Why does our society need this value to flourish and thrive? How can this value benefit the student, as well as on a bigger scale

- to their family, the classroom, their community, the world? How would they have shown this value recently?

Once these questions are explored, their answers can help develop a few phrases to add into the guided reflection and visualization. Below is an example of phrases that can be included:

“Reflect back to when you felt courageous. It could have been when you shared what you were grateful for this morning. It could have been you raising your hand in class, and sharing your thoughts. Now, grasping the light of courage in your hands, feel it rush into your heart, your soul, all within you. And imagine everything you can do with all that courage. The world needs courage to thrive and flourish. It is with courage that people follow their dreams and put in the effort to turn their ideas into reality. It is with courage that new technologies are invented and with courage that people speak up about issues in the world. It is with courage that people stand up for nature, for the environment, and ask the world to pay attention to protecting our Earth. It is with courage that people stand up for what’s right, and for their friends in trouble, and for telling the truth when situations are hard. Imagine how the world would look if people had more courage.”

A Series of Gratitude

The VbESD framework will also outline a “Series of Gratitude” each day, for example each morning. This set of activities may take around 5 minutes, and has three components within it that work in synergy.

Gratitude Circle: The first component is the “Gratitude Circle” where the students gather in a circle to start (or end, or take a break within) the day, and the teacher takes a minute to go around to the students asking what they are grateful for that day. The students will be invited to provide two things they’re grateful for, with one of them being an element from nature (i.e. grateful for the sunshine today; for the clear skies; for the warm breeze, etc). The teacher is expected to create a safe, inviting space for the students to share, and appreciate each answer. This sharing is structured to be a few minutes long. At first, students may take a while to think about what they are grateful for. However, once this becomes a regular, daily practice, students will more actively and purposefully think about things they’re grateful for in the morning, or on their way to school, and come prepared for the Circle. After honing this practice, this sharing would take 2-3 minutes.

Daily Reminder: After the sharing comes the second component, the reading of a “Daily Reminder”. At the start of each month (or with each change of the Value), the teacher works with their students to come up with a paragraph together that relates gratitude, the value at hand, and sustainability together. The structure of this reminder can look like this:

“Today, we are grateful. We are grateful for ____, for ____, and for ____, which nature provides us so generously with. We are grateful to be living on this beautiful home, our Earth, and we thank the [name(s) of the first nations/indigenous people if applicable]/our ancestors for taking care of this land for us. We know the importance of the responsibility we have in keeping this home beautiful and abundant in ____, ____, and ___ for all the future children in this world. Our Value of the Month ____ means _____ and living with this value will bring sustainability to the world because/by _____.”

The blanks are words and phrases that the teacher and students come up with together. This paragraph will then become a script that will be put up in the classroom, as well as expressed at the start of each day. There could be various ways that this script can be expressed, and a few examples include where the teacher reads to the students, where the teacher invites any willing students to read together with them, where the students read collectively without the teacher, or as a ‘prize’ where a student is awarded the honour of reading it to the class. Creativity can be applied to this component with ease and is greatly welcomed. This component is crucial because it provides a set structure within the Moment of Gratitude, that is the same every day. It also explicitly links sustainability with the value, and gratitude for nature which is key for fostering sustainability as a value. Expressing this Daily Reminder would take about a minute.

Moment of Gratitude: After the expression of the Daily Reminder comes the third and last component, the true “Moment of Gratitude” which the two previous components lead up to. For this final component, the students are invited to take one minute to be grateful and think about what they are grateful for. This component is best at the end, because the students would have received prompts from their peers as well as the Daily Reminder, and have the connection between the Value and sustainability fresh in their minds. At the end of the minute, the students can be given another minute if the teacher wishes, to write their gratitudes or thoughts down in their reflection journal. With this component taking about 2 minutes, the entire Series of Gratitude would take about 5 minutes structured at the beginning of each day.

Pillar 4: Atmosphere & Ethos

A school’s atmosphere is what surrounds each learner both inside and outside the classroom. It permeates the entire school, and any and all visitors can feel it as soon as they step inside. Many schools nowadays have an atmosphere that is focused on achieving high grades and results. However, values-based schools focus on bringing a deep positive difference to the student’s worldview that underpins their thoughts and decisions. A school’s atmosphere is determined by any structures and systems put in place, for example reward systems, friendly competitions, community projects and activities, and school-wide campaigns. A VbESD school atmosphere

would have the same welcoming, friendly and positive environment as a VbE school, but also one where there is a focus on learning from and living in harmony with nature. Clear nature elements and displays with explicit focus on sustainability would be present, such as signage, stickers, boards, plants and green spaces.

List of examples of elements in VbESD schools to create an atmosphere and ethos rooted in sustainability:

- Living walls and classroom plants
- School garden (i.e. a values garden would perfectly connect VbESD elements to VbE)
- Outdoor time and outdoor education
- Boards and displays that explicitly mention sustainability-related topics
- Stickers on resource-using locations (i.e. electrical outlets, light switches, taps, toilet flushers, computer monitors, etc.)
- Signage related to sustainability (i.e. waste sorting signage)
- Green space
- Natural architecture (i.e. nature playgrounds, stone amphitheater, etc)

Pillar #5: Curriculum

This pillar is one common to any educational setting, and each school already has this component. In the VbE framework however, the curriculum is not only focused on numeracy and literacy, and memorizing facts and figures - values sit at the core of it and transcends the formal, informal, and hidden or implicit layers of the curriculum where it is taught not only implicitly but explicitly.

The VbESD curriculum includes everything that the VbE curriculum comprises, but also adds on explicit lesson planning for raising awareness, knowledge and skills about sustainable development. In a VbESD curriculum, anything that can be related to sustainability without compromising other teachings is done so. This is where the “knowledge and skills” within the definition of Education for Sustainable Development come in. The VbESD framework outlines a curriculum that will explain the science and definition of sustainability while addressing the issues, solutions, root causes and intersectionality of climate change and unsustainable development, in order to foster the [Competences in Education for Sustainable Development](#) (page 8).

Examples of topics that are covered within a VbESD school curriculum:

- Definition & types of sustainability
- Importance of sustainability

- Science behind climate change
- Effects & impacts of climate change
- Solutions to climate change
- Intersectionalities of the climate crisis

The Learning Objectives built within the lessons will also be based off the [Competences in Education for Sustainable Development](#) (page 8 of this document).

Pillar 6: Leadership

In values-based educational settings, leadership does not only encompass teacher leadership that influences their students: leadership starts from the student itself. Values-based Education fosters self-leadership to live the values they learn, leadership to encourage and keep their classmates and peers accountable, leadership to their family when they share about the values and learnings at home, leadership within their community by modelling their values in their extracurricular lives, and a global leadership once they become engaged, global citizens. Everyone who is within the student's environment is part of a ripple effect that is deeply transformative. Leadership within VbESD encompasses everything within VbE, with an added leadership pertaining to sustainable behaviours and lifestyles. VbESD cultivates leadership that is much needed in the rapidly-developing world that we are living in; one that is compassionate, courageous, gentle, resilient, and insightful.

Pillar 7: Ethical Vocabulary

The ethical vocabulary grounds values-based education by providing its students with a common language that expresses their understanding of the values, and the tool to communicate their thoughts and reasonings from that shared understanding.

In a VbESD school, this ethical vocabulary is expanded from the values in VbE, to incorporate language that relates to sustainability as well. In addition to understanding what values such as courage, hope, love, joy, respect, and kindness means, students are also raised in the environment to understand what sustainability means, in all its aspects. They will understand not only the terms of sustainability and sustainable development, but also its pillars of environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability as well as terms and concepts such as climate change, global warming, recycling, clean energy, environmental degradation, biodiversity, ecosystem, social wellbeing, eco-friendly, overconsumption, waste, resource usage, stewardship, pollution, conservation and preservation.

However, the essence of the ethical vocabulary pillar is that students not only know the vocabulary, they fully understand and experience the vocabulary as well. In order to understand and experience the values taught in a values-based school, there needs to be a significant amount of intention behind selecting and planning for each value.

Defining sustainability

Before anything else, a school that decides to practice VbESD has to decide for them how they would like to define sustainability. Seeing as vagueness of what sustainability means and inconsistent definitions are common barriers to incorporating sustainability within the education system, it is important that the VbESD framework has a clear definition of sustainability. Therefore, to not compromise on either consistency nor each school's creative freedom, the VbESD framework encourages participating schools to have two definitions of sustainability: one as the formal, official definition, and one as how that looks like within their school. It is important to keep in mind that the school-specific definition should be easy to understand, even for children. For example, when explaining it to students, the educator can say:

"To behave sustainably means to behave in ways that meet our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs either. At (name of school), this means to make sure that we take care of our home, including the people, animals and nature, so that they all thrive even when we're old."

The official definition is "meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", from the Brundtland Commission in 1987. The school-specific definition can be established at the same time as the other definitions and values that are decided for the school, further explained below.

Underpinning sustainability within the school's chosen values

Once a school decides and commits to adopting the VbE model, they undergo a process of consultation with their stakeholders, including all their staff, parents, governors, and pupils, to decide each of their school's values. The most important values are shared and decided upon collectively, as well as how they are organized (i.e. one value per month, term, week, etc). For example, one common approach is selecting 20 values, which will be cycled through fully in two academic years with one value per month.

The VbESD framework takes that process to the next level by adding a step of relating each value to sustainability. In the VbESD framework, all of the values selected are rooted in

sustainability regardless of which ones they are and how many. The value of sustainability is then present within all the values, and it allows the school the freedom to choose whichever values are important to them, while maintaining the explicit goal and overall foundation of sustainability.

After choosing the school's values, the stakeholders also decide how they would like to relate each value to sustainability. For example, the value of respect could be defined as showing courtesy and treating everyone with care and dignity. This value's understanding then can be explicitly expanded to how it relates to sustainability, in a way that is easily understood for children. For example, they can decide that respect is important to sustainability because in order to care for and value the planet and its people, we must first have respect for all the plants, animals, and people that live here. Below are a few other examples of how different values can be related back to sustainability:

- *Love* is important for sustainability because that is how we will care about each other and the planet.
- *Teamwork* is important for sustainability because by working together, we can solve the world's issues much faster and build stronger communities.
- *Happiness* is important for sustainability because happy people do good work, spread happiness and inspire others to pursue their wellbeing as well.
- *Honesty* is important for sustainability because in order to improve and gain trust, we need to be honest about our actions, goals and progress, and willing to share ourselves.
- *Trust* is important for sustainability because we need to trust each other, trust businesses, trust leaders, to make decisions that will lead to a better world.
- *Kindness* is important for sustainability because kindness allows us to understand others, provide others with what they need, and to not harm others, including the environment.
- *Resilience* is important for sustainability because resilience is needed to overcome challenges and bounce back from societal issues such as poverty and hunger and natural disasters.
- *Hope* is important for sustainability because hope creates and keeps the vision for a better world alive.

In addition to relating the chosen values to sustainability, the committee will also decide on a school-specific definition for sustainability. Otherwise, they can use the official definition for their school definition as well.

Explicit connection to sustainability in language

With this added step when establishing the school's values, there can be a clear and explicit connection and reason for how each value connects and leads to sustainability. Just like how in

VbE schools, every opportunity is taken to explicitly talk about each value, teachers in VbESD schools would take every opportunity to not only talk about each value but relate it back to why it's important for sustainability as well. Some examples are provided below, but there are unlimited opportunities to bring sustainability and values into the discussion:

Non-VbE educator	VbE educator	VbESD educator
"Please recycle, class!"	"Recycling these papers show responsibility."	"Recycling these papers shows responsibility and is important because it lets us use the same paper to make new pieces of paper, instead of cutting down more trees and causing harm to the environment"
"Let's have a short break, class."	"Let's have a short break, class. Use this time to regain some peace and calm."	"Okay class, take this break to refill your water bottles! Using reusable bottles is great because we can use them again and again, without needing to create plastic waste."
"Don't step on the grass!"	"Thank you for showing care around the grass."	"Thank you for showing kindness to the earth by being careful around the grass. Kindness is such an important value to have because that is how we will make sure that we treat both other people and our planet well, and leave it in good condition for our future generations."
"You did so well today!"	"You showed a lot of courage today!"	"You showed a lot of courage today! That courage is so valuable because when you grow up and need to make harder decisions, you will be drawing on that courage. If you have a great idea for the world, you will need a lot of courage to make it come true."
"I loved the story that you wrote! You have a great imagination."	"I loved the story that you wrote! There is so much hope filled inside."	"I see a lot of hope in this story you wrote. This hope is what will create our brighter future, and let us see the potential for the world, where people are happy and the planet is healthy."

As you can see, sustainability goes hand in hand with all the other values, and can easily be incorporated into VbE's existing ethical vocabulary to reinforce the ethical importance of sustainability and nurturing it within a student's moral compass and ethical intelligence.

Sustainability embedded into displays

Another component crucial to ethical vocabulary apart from the language used in the classroom is the visual displays all around the classroom and school. In most VbE schools, there are displays of values in each classroom, ranging from bulletin boards, values baskets, values boxes, values-based characters, posters, and signs. In schools practicing VbESD, sustainability would be at the foundational or overarching value that connects all the other values. For example, if the display was a values tree with leaves symbolizing the values, sustainability could be put at the root or trunk of the tree.

With language, displays, and codes that explicitly mention values as well as relate them back to their importance and sustainability, teachers are able to create an environment where the students are surrounded by the values and where sustainable development is embedded within the core of their learning.

Pillar 8: Sustainable school operations

This last pillar is a new pillar that provides the final distinction between a VbESD school and a VbE school. Sustainable school operations consist of everything that happens at an institutional level, both visible and invisible to its pupils. Examples include the foodservice (i.e. school cafeteria, breakfast or snack programs), resources used (i.e. water, electricity, and gas usage), building design, equipment used (i.e. energy-efficient lighting, heating, or other technologies), green space (i.e. living walls, rooftop or school/community gardens), products used (i.e. cleaning products, paper napkins, toilet paper, classroom materials), professional development, and signage (i.e. bulletin boards, posters, murals).

While in a sense, these structures can be considered 'Modelling' on a school level, a separate category for them is more reasonable because they are usually not decisions that teachers can make themselves, unlike modelling and the curriculum. Of course, developing this pillar also takes more than simply staff behaviour - it also needs financial resources and time as well. Guidelines will be provided for these sustainable school operations to serve as ideal goals, and VbESD schools would simply try their best and implement whatever is feasible and possible alongside a reasonable time frame. The ultimate goal in this pillar is to have such embedded institutional sustainability that it will be the clear and easy choice all around.

Last Remarks

All together, Values-based Education for Sustainable Development is truly what can change the world and its unsustainable culture. Values are what define mindsets, which then build

routines and structures, which make up a group's culture. By nurturing positive values alongside sustainability as a value in children, VbESD will in turn sprout ethical mindsets, empowering routines and structures, and ultimately, a culture of social transformation where people, animals, and nature can all flourish together.

Resources:

- [Pictures & Assets for VbESD](#)
- UNESCO's webpage on [Education for Sustainable Development \(ESD\)](#)
- [Values-based Education \(VbE\)](#) website
- More information on my thesis: <https://www.adventureswithwildheart.com/values>
- VbESD surveys: [Survey #1](#) | [Survey #2](#)