

LEVERAGING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES AMONG STUDENTS

Sugney Harsora¹, Arihaant Chakrabarti Vignesh², Ruchika Dhingra³

Global Indian International School, Ahmedabad, India

sugney.harsora@globalschoolsalumni.com¹; arihaantchakrabarti@gmail.com²;
ruchika.dhingra@globalschool.com³

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing educational practice, while sustainability education remains central to global policy agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Despite growing interest in both areas, limited conceptual work has examined how AI may be aligned with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in secondary school contexts. This paper presents a conceptual analysis of AI in education and sustainability education, synthesising international policy frameworks and recent literature. It explores how AI may support systems thinking, personalised inquiry, and collaborative learning within sustainability-oriented teaching practices. Two illustrative examples aligned with Cambridge and CBSE curricular priorities are included to demonstrate potential applications. The paper positions AI as a pedagogical resource for reflective, ethical, and experiential sustainability learning.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence in education, sustainability education, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), secondary schools.*

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming educational ecosystems around the world, offering tools that can support personalised learning, data-driven decision making, and enhanced instructional strategies (UNESCO, 2025). International frameworks such as the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and UNESCO's initiatives on AI in education explicitly link technological innovation to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 4.7 (education for sustainable development and global citizenship) (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2025). While AI is often discussed in terms of technical capability, recent scholarship emphasises its potential to enhance teaching and learning processes and deepen students' understanding of complex societal issues (Lee et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024).

Concurrently, sustainability education which is often framed as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) seeks to foster learners' awareness, competencies, and agency for addressing environmental, social, and ethical challenges (United Nations, 2015). ESD emphasises active engagement, systems thinking, and critical reflection, with a clear

orientation toward transformative action (Pashby et al., 2021). Despite theoretical convergence, there remains limited conceptual clarity on how AI can be intentionally leveraged within sustainability education, particularly in secondary school settings where sustainability practices are increasingly embedded within curricula and pedagogies (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

This paper aims to provide a conceptual analysis of AI in education and sustainability education, demonstrating how these domains intersect to enrich learning that aligns with global sustainability agendas. By drawing on policy priorities and emerging scholarly work, focusing on secondary school examples, the conceptual pathways are highlighted to support integration while avoiding empirical claims unsupported by data. The subsequent sections will explore current literature to define and contextualise AI in education, discuss sustainability and ESD, and synthesise the conceptual intersection of AI and sustainability learning, and provide illustrative cases and implications related to AI in education and sustainable practices in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Artificial Intelligence in Education

Artificial intelligence in education comprises computational systems capable of tasks such as adaptive feedback, pattern recognition, and personalised learning pathways (UNESCO, 2025). UNESCO's recent reports outline how AI technologies which include intelligent tutoring systems and predictive analytics can enable differentiated support, scaffold student understanding, and streamline administrative tasks so educators can emphasise human-centred pedagogies (UNESCO, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Global reviews similarly identify AI's potential to enhance quality and equity by adapting to diverse learner needs (Apata et al., 2025).

Beyond infrastructure, AI's role in shaping educational practice raises important pedagogical and ethical concerns. Research emphasises that AI should support student discourse, collaboration, and critical thinking rather than merely automate tasks (Lee et al., 2023). For instance, generative AI has been designed to sustain student discourse and knowledge creation, fostering richer interactions rather than passive consumption of content (Lee et al., 2023). Studies in AI literacy education also indicate that maker-based activities such as constructing AI-driven recycling bins can enhance students' competencies and motivation in secondary settings (Ng et al., 2024). These teaching and learning engagements illustrate how AI may be aligned with broader educational objectives that value student involvement in technological advancements and development of higher-order thinking skills like problem solving.

Importantly, ethical considerations including transparency, data privacy, and equitable access remain central to AI integration in learning environments (Isaifan et al., 2025). Human-AI collaboration frameworks suggest that AI should be viewed as enhancing learning capacity while retaining the central role of educators in design and implementation, emphasising the importance of balancing algorithmic assistance with human pedagogical agency (Yang et al., 2025). This conceptualisation positions AI not as a replacement for human teachers but as a tool to amplify learning processes within pedagogically sound frameworks.

Sustainability and Education for Sustainable Development

Sustainability encompasses environmental, social, and economic well-being, aiming to meet present needs without compromising the future (United Nations, 2015). The United Nations' SDG agenda positions sustainability education within SDG 4.7, which calls for learning that builds understanding and competencies in global citizenship, ethics, and sustainable living (United Nations, 2015). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) emphasises learning that is participatory, interdisciplinary, and action-oriented, encouraging learners to engage with real-world challenges and adopt responsible behaviours.

ESD's pedagogical principles, such as experiential learning, systems thinking, and reflective inquiry support learners in integrating knowledge across domains and developing futures-oriented competencies (Pashby et al., 2021). Such teaching and learning methods align well with school curricula that feature project-based learning and community engagement, yet sustainability education also faces the struggle of acquiring tools that help learners visualise and interact with these systemic relationships.

AI's potential to model complex systems, personalise learners' engagement with sustainability concepts, and support data-driven inquiry uniquely aligns with these ESD objectives. For example, AI-powered simulations can make invisible environmental processes visible, supporting higher-order thinking about climate systems, resource flows, and societal impacts. Although empirical research in this area is still emerging, conceptual reviews indicate that AI can facilitate sustainability teaching and learning by providing personalised pathways, immersive experiences, and real-time feedback that deepen understanding of sustainability challenges (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

AI-Supported Sustainability Learning

The conceptual intersection of AI in education with sustainability education highlights a shared emphasis on learning that prepares students for complex, uncertain futures. AI's capabilities in personalised adaptation, intelligent feedback, and interactive modelling resonate with ESD's focus on active, learner-centred, and systems-based approaches. This intersection suggests that AI can play a complementary role in enabling learners to engage meaningfully with sustainability issues by strengthening three areas:

Systems Thinking

AI-driven simulations and analytics can help learners explore complex relationships within environmental and social systems, fostering deeper conceptual understanding of sustainability challenges.

Personalised Inquiry

Adaptive AI tools can tailor sustainability learning pathways based on individual interests, enabling differentiated engagement with sustainability goals and competencies.

Collaborative Knowledge Building

Generative AI has the potential to support sustained classroom discourse and co-construction of knowledge, encouraging students to articulate, critique, and refine ideas around sustainability concepts (Lee et al., 2023).

Furthermore, project-based interventions, such as creating AI-enabled recycling systems, illustrate how AI can be embedded within sustainability practices that are both technically relevant and contextually meaningful for secondary learners (Ng et al., 2024). These pedagogical alignments underscore the potential for AI to enhance learner agency, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving within sustainability education.

However, ethical and equity considerations are critical. Conceptual frameworks emphasise that AI integration should centre responsible, human-centred use, transparently address data privacy, and ensure equitable access to avoid reinforcing existing disparities (Isaifan et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2025). Aligning AI with ESD requires educators to design learning experiences that foreground ethical reflection, societal implications, and sustainability outcomes rather than technology use for its own sake.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES FROM SCHOOL PRACTICE

This section presents two illustrative examples that demonstrate how artificial intelligence (AI) may be conceptually integrated into school-based sustainability education aligned with Cambridge and CBSE curricular priorities. The examples illustrate how AI may support environmental education, responsible global citizenship, and experiential learning through reflective and inquiry-oriented pedagogical approaches (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

Example 1: AI-Supported Resource Awareness in the School Environment

Context

In a school setting where sustainability is positioned as a cross-curricular priority, environmental education can be embedded across subjects such as science, geography, and social studies. This approach reflects Cambridge's emphasis on cross-curricular themes and CBSE's mandate for holistic and experiential learning under the National Education Policy framework (NCERT, 2023). Sustainability is framed as a shared responsibility, supported by school leadership and embedded within everyday learning experiences.

AI Tool or Approach Used

An AI-enabled visualisation tool can be introduced to support inquiry into patterns of resource use within the school environment. Drawing on historical or simulated datasets related to energy, water, or waste, the AI applies pattern recognition techniques to present trends over time. Consistent with conceptual approaches to AI in education, the tool is non-prescriptive and functions as a prompt for exploration rather than optimisation (Holmes et al., 2022; Selwyn, 2022).

Sustainability Focus

The sustainability focus centres on environmental awareness and responsible resource use. Students are encouraged to examine how everyday practices relate to broader sustainability challenges and environmental systems, supporting the development of systems thinking and global awareness (Sterling, 2022; Wals & Benavot, 2023).

Learning Value

The learning value lies in fostering reflective learning and competency development. Through guided inquiry, students may engage in interpreting data representations, questioning assumptions, and discussing ethical considerations related to environmental stewardship. The AI tool functions as a cognitive scaffold that supports critical thinking and conceptual understanding, aligning with competency-based and inquiry-oriented learning expectations across Cambridge and CBSE curricula (OECD, 2022; Ng et al., 2023).

Example 2: Student-Led AI Design within Sustainability Projects

Context

In an upper primary or secondary school context, sustainability can be explored through experiential and project-based learning structures. Students are encouraged to take an active role in identifying environmental issues relevant to their school or community, reflecting Cambridge's active learning philosophy and CBSE's emphasis on student agency and innovation (NCERT, 2023; OECD, 2022).

AI Tool or Approach Used

Students can engage with accessible AI design platforms that allow them to conceptualise sustainability-related applications, such as digital models for smart irrigation or representations of carbon usage. These platforms rely on simplified interfaces and pre-trained algorithms, enabling students to focus on design thinking, ethical reflection, and contextual relevance rather than technical implementation (Holmes et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2023).

Sustainability Focus

The sustainability focus is exploratory and interdisciplinary. Students examine environmental challenges through scientific, social, and ethical lenses, recognising sustainability as a complex and evolving concept rather than a problem with definitive solutions. This framing aligns with contemporary sustainability education perspectives that emphasise learning processes and transformation over measurable outcomes (Sterling, 2022; Wals & Benavot, 2023).

Learning Value

This example highlights AI's potential to support experiential learning, problem awareness, and creative thinking. Students may engage in abstraction, evaluation, and reflection as they consider how technological tools influence environmental decision-making. Learning is oriented towards conceptual understanding and ethical awareness, consistent with Cambridge learner attributes and CBSE competency-based learning priorities (Beauchamp & Childress, 2023; Selwyn, 2022).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Viewed through the lens of Cambridge and CBSE curricular philosophies, these illustrative examples suggest several implications for sustainability-oriented educational practice. Curriculum design may benefit from integrating AI as a pedagogical support within environmental education themes rather than positioning it as a standalone technological subject. Such integration supports curriculum coherence and reinforces sustainability as a cross-cutting educational priority (Sinnema et al., 2022; OECD, 2023).

Teacher professional development plays a critical role in enabling meaningful implementation. Educators may require structured opportunities to develop confidence in facilitating inquiry-based and experiential learning supported by AI tools. Professional learning that focuses on pedagogical intent, ethical reflection, and interdisciplinary connections align with active learning approaches and competency-based pedagogies promoted across both Cambridge and CBSE systems (Beauchamp & Childress, 2023; Ng et al., 2023).

At the school leadership level, governance frameworks and institutional policies can shape responsible AI adoption. Both Cambridge and CBSE emphasise values-based education and responsible global citizenship. Within this context, leadership can articulate guiding principles for AI use that prioritise student wellbeing, ethical data practices, and alignment with sustainability goals (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Ethical considerations remain central to AI-supported sustainability learning. Issues related to data use, transparency, and algorithmic bias can be incorporated into learning itself, enabling students to critically reflect on the social and environmental implications of digital technologies. Such an approach reinforces ethical literacy as part of holistic development rather than as a compliance requirement (Williamson & Hogan, 2023; Selwyn, 2022).

Overall, these implications suggest that AI has the potential to strengthen sustainability education when embedded within reflective, experiential, and competency-focused learning environments aligned with Cambridge and CBSE priorities.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This conceptual paper has explored how AI may be aligned with sustainability education in secondary school contexts using terminology and pedagogical principles consistent with Cambridge and CBSE curricula. By foregrounding environmental education, experiential learning, and responsible global citizenship, the paper positions AI as a pedagogical resource that supports conceptual understanding and reflective inquiry rather than technical performance (Holmes et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

The relevance of this conceptual contribution lies in its applicability to diverse school contexts seeking coherence between curriculum intent, sustainability commitments, and emerging technologies. AI has the potential to support systems thinking, ethical awareness, and interdisciplinary learning, all of which are key priorities within contemporary sustainability education discourse (Sterling, 2022; Wals & Benavot, 2023).

This paper offers a conceptual foundation that schools may adapt in line with their curricular pathways and sustainability priorities. The illustrative examples are intended to stimulate professional dialogue and reflective planning. Future empirical research is needed to examine how AI-supported sustainability learning is enacted in classroom contexts. Design-based and classroom-based studies may provide insights into pedagogical practices, teacher facilitation, and student learning processes over time (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023). As sustainability continues to be a central educational priority, this conceptual framework positions itself as a starting point for responsible and reflective innovation.

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