Education unwillingly has become a key mechanism for fostering economic development, innovation and growth. In the meantime, humanity is facing a range of sustainability issues that include: rising inequity, loss of democracy, runaway climate change and mass extinction. These issues can be so overwhelming that they can easily lead to apathy and despair which will only make them bigger. We appear to be at a tipping point where the decisions we make about how to live together will be crucial for the future of our planet. There is no better time than now to ask:  What is education for? What if education would serve people and planet rather than just or mainly economic interests?  Is this a role education should play? And, if so, what does such an education look like?

Based on emerging research and practices from around the world, I will sketch forms of education and learning that are: responsive, responsible and transformative in light of global sustainability challenges. Sustainability here is not seen as another subject to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but rather as a continuous quest for finding ways to live more equitably, meaningfully and healthier on the Earth without compromising planetary boundaries and the futures of the coming generations. Such a quest requires a more relational pedagogy that can help establish deeper connections with people, places and other species. Such a pedagogy not only invites reflection on values and ethics, and the utilization of diversity, but also the critiquing and transgressing of the structures and systems that make living unsustainably easy and living sustainably hard.

Against the grain but with the tide, schools around the world, from early childhood education to primary and secondary education, from vocational to higher education, are beginning to re-orient teaching and learning in this vein. They do so by re-designing school grounds, building bridges between school and community, utilizing forms of citizen science, rethinking the way schools use energy, food and water, involving learners in decision-making and design, building-in new concepts like global citizenship, cradle-to-cradle, circularity and biomimicry, and by blending different forms of learning. In the end, taking sustainability seriously in education implies a transition towards more localized curricula, rooted in existential questions and a shift towards more autonomous schools where there is space for inquiry, discovery, empathy and action, always in connection with the bigger world in which the local is nested. Using the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a backdrop, I will highlight a number of principles, practices and challenges of re-orienting education towards sustainability.