

Environmental education: possibilities and constraints

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Over the last 30 years, those involved in environmental education have gradually become aware of the richness and breadth of the educational project they have contributed to build. They have realised that the environment is not merely a subject to be studied or a theme to be analysed among others; nor is it only the necessary constraint of a development we want to be sustainable. The weft of the environment is life itself, at the interface between nature and culture; the environment is the crucible in which our identities, our relations with others and our “being-in-the-world” are formed.

Environmental education is therefore not a “form” of education (an “education for ...”) among many others; it is not simply a tool for environmental problem-solving or management. It is a essential dimension of basic education focused on a sphere of interaction that lies at the root of personal and social developmentⁱ: the sphere of relationships with our environment, with our common “home of life”. Environmental education aims to induce social dynamics, first in the local community and subsequently in wider networks of solidarity, fostering a collaborative and critical approach to socio-environmental realities and an autonomous and creative grasp of current problems and possible solutions.

Over and above an education “about, on, in, by or for” the environment, the concern of environmental education (EE) is basically our relationship to the environment. It is thus important for educators to take account of the many possible dimensions of this relationship, which correspond to different but complementary ways of apprehending the environment.

- Let us first consider the **environment as nature** (to be appreciated, respected and preserved). Underlying the socio-environmental problems is the fundamental rupture between human beings and nature, which needs to be bridged. We must rebuild the sense of belonging to nature, to the flow of life of which we are a part. Environmental education also leads us to explore the close links between identity, culture and nature, to realise that through nature we find part of our own human identity, our identity as living beings among other living beings. It is also important to recognise the links between biological diversity and cultural diversity and to value this “biocultural” diversity.
- Then there is the **environment as a resource** (to be managed, to be shared). There is no life without the cycles of matter and energy. EE implies conservation education, education for responsible consumption and solidarity, with equitable sharing within and among societies and between present-day and future societies. The concern is to manage systems of production and use of shared resources as well as systems of processing waste and by-products. EE integrates economic education focused not on the “management of the environment” but on the “management” of our own individual and collective relations with regard to vital resources taken from the environment.
- **Environment as a problem** (to be avoided, to be solved) requires the development of skills for critical investigation into the realities of our milieu and for the enlighten diagnosis of

problems. It strives to make people realise that environmental problems are socio-environmental issues. Environmental education invites us to solve real problems and to make plans for preventive action. The development of skills in this field could strengthen the feeling that something can be done, that each one can contribute, a feeling that may in turn trigger the desire to take action.

- **Environment as a system** (to understand so as to improve decision-making) calls for the development of systemic thinking: by analysing the components and relationships of the environment as an “eco-socio-system” (according to the expression proposed by Louis Goffin, 1999), one can gain a global understanding of environmental realities and thus have the necessary inputs for judicious decision-making. It is here that ecological education basically comes into play: it involves learning about the diversity, richness and complexity of one’s environment; learning to define one’s human “niche” in the global ecosystem; and learning to fill it properly. In a systemic perspective, EE also encourages us to recognise the links between here and elsewhere, between the past, the present and the future, between local and global matters, between the political, economic and environmental spheres, between lifestyles, health and the environment, etc.
- **Environment as a place to live** (to get to know, to improve) is focused on everyday life – at school, at home, at work, etc. Here the first stage of environmental education is to explore and rediscover one’s own surroundings, that is, the “here and now” of everyday realities, with a fresh look that is both appreciative and critical; it also involves redefining oneself and defining one’s social group in terms of our relationship with our surroundings, our living place. Projects can be devised to restore or design environments that enhance comfort, security, health, social interactions or the aesthetic qualities of the place. Through such exploration and projects, EE aims to develop a sense of belonging and to encourage dwelling. The local context is the first crucible for the development of environmental responsibility, in which we learn to become guardians, responsible users and builders of *Oïkos*, our common “home of life”.
- **Environment as the biosphere** (in which to live together over the long term) makes us take into account the interdependence of socio-environmental realities at world level, our “small planet” which James Lovelock calls *Gaïa* and regards as a self-regulating macro-organism. It is the locus of planetary, even cosmic, consciousness: Earth as a life-giving matrix or shared garden which nurtures the symbolic universe of many indigenous peoples. It is the focus of international solidarity which invites us to think more deeply about the modes of development of human societies. We find here an ideal context for taking advantage of the interface between EE and education for development.
- **Environment as a community project** (in which to become actively involved) focuses on co-operation and partnership to achieve desired changes within a community. People need to learn to live and work together in communities of learning and practice. The environment is seen as a shared and essentially complex object: only a collaborative approach can foster better understanding and more effective action. People must learn to discuss, listen, argue and convince, in a word, to communicate effectively through a dialogue in which various types of knowledge – scientific knowledge, practical experience, traditional knowledge – and so forth are brought into play. Here the idea of praxis is introduced: action is associated with a constant process of critical reflection. Education for democracy, the mainstay of citizenship education, becomes vital. The political aspects of socio-environmental realities are highlighted.

Of course, other representations of the environment could be identified and characterised. For example, the **environment as territory** among indigenous peoples (who attest the narrow association between cultural identity and the land) or the **environment as landscape** (the geographer's view, which opens the way to the interpretation of local contexts, highlighting the dynamics of their historical development and their symbolic components). The relationship to the environment depends greatly on the context and is culturally determined. It is therefore expressed through a set of interlinked and complementary dimensions. An environmental education that is limited to only one of these dimensions is incomplete and nourishes a biased vision of what is "being-in-the-world".

Because it is so wide-ranging and demands in-depth changes, environmental education is indeed difficult to carry out. It calls for the involvement of the whole educational community: schools, museums, parks, municipalities, community organisations, firms, etc. It is for each actor to identify their own educational "niche" in EE, depending on the particular context of their action, the target group and the resources available to them: the issue is to choose objectives and strategies that are relevant and realistic without forgetting the full range of other possible objectives and strategies. Each specific activity or project should be seen as complementary to and preferably integrated with those of the other EE actors and with other associated dimensions of basic education, in particular citizenship education (focused on an awareness of human diversity and more specifically on questions of democracy, peace and solidarity) and health education (associated *inter alia* with issues of nutrition, outdoor education and risk education).

Over the years, a growing number of environmental education actors have added a research or reflection component to their practical action on the ground. An "educational heritage" has thus been built up, including a rich diversity of theoretical propositions, models and strategies capable of stimulating discussion and inspiring practitioners.ⁱⁱ An analysis of these proposals makes it possible to identify different currents of thought and practice in EE: naturalist, conservationist, problem-solving, systemic, holistic, humanist, critical, bioregional, feminist, etc. (Sauvé, 2002). These currents reflect diverse and complementary ways of relating to the environment. In a professional development process for teachers, animators and other educators, one of the first tasks is to subject these currents to critical scrutiny in order to highlight the different possibilities, to stimulate reflection and more creative teaching, and to make relevant choices in the light of each particular context of action.

The field of environmental education is therefore developing in a constructive manner. It is, however, faced with major issues that could compromise its basic goals. The main current challenge is the prevalence of the development ideology (Rist, 1996) promoted in the proposal of "education for sustainable development". Here education is perceived as a tool in the service of the long-term conservation of the environment, the latter being regarded as a pool of resources to be utilised for a sustained economic growth, which is itself regarded as the pre-condition for "human development" (Sauvé, Berryman and Brunelle, 2000). In the conceptual framework of sustainable development, often illustrated in the form of three interlinked spheres (economy, society and environment), the economy is viewed as a separate autonomous entity, outside the social sphere, that determines a society's relationship to the environment. While that does indeed reflect the current alienation of societies in regard to an exogenous and dominant economy, should such a vision of the world be nonetheless promoted as the supreme goal of all humanity?

The idea of sustainable development is, of course, relevant in certain respects and in certain contexts, such as when it becomes the key to initiating dialogue among actors in the economic, political and environmental spheres. That is in fact how the concept came into being. It has been presented as the product of a social "consensus" (in reality, the outcome of a negotiation round between certain privileged social actors in a specific historical context). Let us note that this idea of

a consensus happens to be very seductive at a time when formerly “unquestioned values” and metanarratives are collapsing: consensus-building confers a measure of legitimacy on decisions and makes it possible to “manage” the diversity of possible approaches to the issues at stake.

But is consensus (too often false consensus) an appropriate basis for intervention and action in matter of education and environment? Is it not a mistake to confuse the strategy of sustainable development (however astute it may be seen to be for some specific purposes) with a blueprint for all society, with a social ideal, and to redefine education as a whole, in all countries, in terms of this now dominant vision of the world? The utilitarian conception of education and the resource-based representation of the environment adopted by “education for a sustainable development” are clearly reductionist from the standpoint of a basic education aimed at fully developing the web of relations between persons, the social group to which they belong and the environment. The relationship with the world cannot be seen solely as a question of “resource management”; human activities cannot be interpreted only within the context of “development” overusing the language of durability (or viability or sustainability)ⁱⁱⁱ in a sort of “newspeak” that is spreading throughout the world, superimposed on each culture and reducing the ability to think differently about realities. It must also be recognised that the ethics of sustainability is a product of the “heuristics of fear” (to quote Hans Jonas, 1992) associated with the current crisis in security (one of its manifestations being the interest in human cloning); while it may constitute a first step towards an upturn in ethics, it is certainly not broad enough to found a blueprint for a society, and even less for humanity.

As a result of strong criticisms from all quarters (philosophers, sociologists, educators, other economists, etc.) directed at the idea of sustainable development,^{iv} the current trend is to invite each one to redefine, in their own way, this inescapable concept, that has now been established in the various spheres of society. It is thus agreed that sustainable development is not a clearly defined goal (to sustain development is indeed vague) but a road to open up towards this goal, which will progressively appear more clearly ; each one, each country, must chart its course as it sees fit. After the argument of the existence of a universal consensus for sustainable development, this new argument about the legitimacy, even the necessity, of identifying different paths to the goal seems to work well in promoting the idea of “sustainable development” as the saviour of humanity. In this context emerged the proposal of “education for a sustainable future”, a quasi-synonymous of education for sustainable development. This concept has the advantage of proposing a framework that integrates the various dimensions of contemporary education (relating to peace, democracy, international co-operation, the environment, etc.), but this framework limits the scope of each of these educational fields. As these other theme-based “forms of education”, environmental education is reduced to a mere instrument in the service of sustainable development. Moreover EE ceases to be seen as a setting for interdisciplinarity and the dialogue of knowledge systems (knowledge related to the biophysical and human sciences, traditional knowledge, experience, common sense, etc.); it becomes more narrowly associated to the field of biophysical sciences and technology, the key area of the new “knowledge economy”.

It is possible however to conceive of an environmental education that considers the sustainable development proposal (as a socio-historical phenomenon), but that is not locked into it. Environmental education can only be achieved in a context in which social criticism is not impeded; the relationship to the environment is not *a priori* a matter of social compromise, even less of world wide consensus. Environmental education accompanies and supports the emergence and implementation of a project to improve a person’s own relationship to the world, whose significance it helps to clarify in the light of each particular context. In a global perspective, environmental education contributes to the **development of responsible societies**. This last expression seeks to clarify the deliberate vagueness surrounding the word “development” (generally centred on the economy) by linking it to the development of societies (each one integrating its own endogenous economy) and to an ethics of fundamental responsibility, that is significantly richer

than the essentially minimalist ethics of sustainability (“so long as it lasts” or “so long as we survive”). The ethics of responsibility goes beyond a legalist and civic approach to rights and duties; it calls for a sense of responsibility for one’s own being, knowledge and action, which implies commitment, lucidity, authenticity, solicitude and courage.

It is to be hoped that the forthcoming Johannesburg Summit, focused from the very beginning on sustainable development for the whole planet, will afford an opportunity to stimulate a genuine debate on the “consensus” underpinning this blueprint for humanity, which has not borne much fruit since the previous summit held in Rio. It will be particularly important to stimulate discussion among all the actors in the field of education, which is both “the mirror and the crucible” of a society’s development, and more specifically among those involved in the field of environmental education, whose vision of education cannot develop fully unless the diversity of ways of apprehending and relating to the world is recognised and valued.

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i At the root of personal and social development are three closely linked spheres of interaction: of interaction with oneself (for construction of one’s own identity), of interaction with others (for construction of relations with other human beings), and of interaction with the shared “home of life”, *Oïkos*, the setting for ecological education and economic education, where the sense of “being-in-the-world” is enriched by the person’s relations with the “non-human world”.

ii We have, among other things, identified nine research journals dedicated specifically to environmental education, which reflect the growing vitality, credibility and recognition of this field of educational reflection and action: *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *Environmental Education Research*, *Environmental Education and Communication*, *The International Journal of Environmental Education and Research*, *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, *The Australian Journal of Environmental Research*, *The Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, *Education relative à l’environnement – Regards, Recherches, Réflexions* and *Tópicos en educación ambiental*.

iii People talk, for example, about “sustainable meals”, a “sustainable mining industry”, “sustainable consumption” or “sustainable water”, and seek “sustainability criteria” for education, and so on.

iv

See in this connection the report on the debate in: Jarnet, A., Jickling B., Sauvé, L., Wals, A. and Clarkin, P. *The Future of Environmental Education in a Postmodern World?* Whitehorse: Yukon College (*Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*), 244 pages.