Constructing Apathy: How Environmentalism and Environmental Education May Be Fostering "Learned Hopelessness" in Children

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Abstract   For children, environmental issues have become part of their formal and informal educational lives. The merging of the terms environment and education in the 1970s has also witnessed an emerging degree of pessimism through bringing the plight of the environment to the educational arena of children. Much of the discourse surrounding sustainable development is premised on a negative outlook regarding the state of the environment. It is these types of negative messages on which this article focuses. This paper suggests that while attempting to educate future generations about environmental issues, environmentalism may have also assisted in developing a generation of children who have not only become apathetic to environmental issues but also lost in a confusing muddle of "learned hopelessness'.

Environmentalism and Education: Complex Bedfellows

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, continued environmental degradation and the significance of human impact on the natural environment were increasingly brought to the attention of western populations. Through academic and public discourse and on the strength of national and international initiatives, people were exposed to the consequences of environmental ruin. Narratives by authors such as Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring* 1962), Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb* 1968; *Eco-catastrophe!* 1970), Edward Goldsmith (*Blueprint for Survival* 1972) and Barry Commoner (*The Closing Circle* 1971) provided impetus to the environmental information explosion. During this era, western societies were presented with emotive perspectives such as the following by Holdren and Ehrlich:

> The world faces today a multiplicity of crises: explosive political and ideological conflicts, rampant malnutrition, grinding poverty, and inexorable erosion of the capacity of the natural environment to support life. These extant and potential disasters are inextricably entwined with each other and with a global population size and growth rate unprecedented in the tenure of *Homo sapiens* (sic) on Earth. Together they preclude a humane and fruitful existence for a considerable fraction of the world's inhabitants, they bid fair to destroy such worthwhile values as today's civilization may embody, and in their most

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sinister aspects they imperil even the habitability of the planet. (Holdren & Ehrlich, 1971, p. 1)

Increasingly, international organisations, including the United Nations, identified the importance of broad educational endeavour as a potential mechanism for solving growing environmental problems. Formal education, at various levels, became one of the vehicles allocated to develop environmental consciousness related to "the quality of environment and commitment to the principle of environmental conservation" (Greenall 1987, p. 3). It was during this period and through further political and international intervention, the term "environmental education" (EE) came into existence (Gough, 1997; Greenall-Gough, 1993; Sterling, 1994). It is evident that this alliance between environmental concern and education as a mechanism for change occurred as a result of increasing pressure from ecologists, environmentalists, conservationists and an increasingly environmentally concerned populace. As Stevenson noted in the late 1980s:

> Extensive media coverage of environmental issues, the publication of numerous books by ecologists, and the emergence of organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Zero Population Growth reflected a widespread concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s that action was needed to change the prevailing pattern of misuse of the environment. (Stevenson, 1987, p. 70)

Interestingly, the continued evolution and emergence of EE in contemporary educational endeavour has been the subject of considerable ideological, philosophical and pedagogical debate. This is not unexpected given the conceptual difficulties in defining environmentalism, let alone education. Timothy O'Riordan provides a lucid description of the problematic nature of the term "environmentalism" when he states:

> Environmentalism is an awkward word. Its heptasyllabic cumbersomeness reflects its conceptual heavyhandedness; it is neither easy to define nor to visualize. It has a will-o'-the-wisp-like character that allows the opportunist or the lazy thinker to interpret it as they wish. One very real danger is to equate it with greenness or green politics which have different meanings. Environmentalism is a collage of values and views of the world, a general patterning of predispositions, being first and foremost a social movement, though one with political overtones. (O'Riordan, 1987, p. 80)

Furthermore, attempting to engage in a discussion as to the nature of education in amalgamation with environmentalist agendas presents many difficulties. One of the most significant challenges occurs in the increasing array of literature suggesting that the "doomsayers" of the 60s, 70s and 80s may have been mistaken regarding the impact of civilisation on the natural environment. While environmental problems are evident there are also arguments contrary to those set out by environmentalists; debate continues regarding the origin, existence and extent of environmental problems (Bailey, 1992; Lomborg, 2001; Ray & Guzzo, 1993; Sanera & Shaw 1999). Furthermore, those involved in EE generally concede that it is a highly complex endeavour in any school setting, that it has struggled to define itself and that it continues to be a forum for pedagogical and ideological debate that is characteristically problematic and often contradictory (Knapp, 2000; Payne, 1995). Ask educators to describe the essence of EE and a multiplicity of responses on both educational and environmental continua emerges. Consider the following description of EE:

> In essence, environmental education involves children, teachers and communities working collectively and democratically towards the resolution

of environmental questions, issues and problems. It is interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and super-disciplinary. It is about values, attitudes, ethics and actions. It is not a subject or an "add-on" (sic). Nor is it an option. It is a way of thinking and a way of practice. It is a positive contribution to counteract the "doom and gloom" and helplessness that many feel about the enormity of environmental and social problems. It is certainly more than recycling, composting and keeping earthworms. (Davis, 1998, p. 146)

The quotation above, while detailed and descriptive, offers a number of subjective terms and propositions and a good example of EE's difficulty in identifying all that it is. The quotation is also indicative of a belief that the nature and purpose of EE should be a contested subject (Gough, 1997; Jickling & Spork, 1998; Mrazek, 1993). However, despite the subjective descriptions and the contested nature of EE expanding volumes of literature in the area offer evidence to support the supposition that the emergence of EE has impacted on many educational settings, and continues to hold implications that appear problematic for traditional forms of education and schooling (Rickson, 2001).

Part of the problem that EE has faced and continues to face has focused on the "how to" of incorporating its broad objectives as set out in Tbilisi in 1977 (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978). Early approaches to EE led to various conceptual frameworks. In its most recent incarnation, *"environmental education for sustainability"* has added to pedagogical and ideological debate as it attempts to bring together and enhance all of the former approaches noted above (Tilbury, 1995). This move to incorporate notions of "sustainability" has been identified as adding even greater ambiguity and complexity to EE (Bonnett, 1999; Jickling, 1992; McKeown & Hopkins, 2003; Smyth, 1995). Efforts towards breaking down this complexity have witnessed variations in approaches to EE. "Action competence" (Jensen & Schnack, 1997), "ecological literacy" (Cutter-MacKenzie & Smith, 2003) "pro-environmental behaviour" (Jensen, 2002; Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002) and "pro-sustainability learning" (Maiteny, 2002) are but a few examples of the endeavour researchers and educators have undertaken in order to reinvigorate EE. However, while new approaches offer new ideas for implementation, discussion and debate, there remains little consensus in how to best meet the goals established at Tbilisi some thirty years ago. Moreover, given the complexity of the nature of environmentalism in juxtaposition with the development of EE, it becomes obvious that an agenda set up to educate a generation of young people about the state of the environment has the potential to send an array of complex, ambiguous and confusing messages.

These messages range in objectivity and maintain varying degrees of potential environmental misinformation and indoctrination. The best case scenario might be for children to arrive at some ambiguous understanding of the "environment", however, there is also the real danger of children developing a sense of "learned hopelessness" and constructing notions of apathy. This seems to be the case regarding some children involved in an international doctoral study.

Learned Hopelessness: So Much Fear, So Little Time

In the mid 1960s a group of researchers led by Martin Seligman (1972; see also Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993; Seligman, Maier & Geer 1968) developed the theory of "learned helplessness", a consequence of some surprising results encountered while studying the relationship between fear and learning in canines. In a controlled study, these researchers used electric shock when dogs attempted to leave their cages. Some time later when the dogs were provided a way out without any form of hindrance, the dogs made no effort to escape. Apparently, the dogs had learned that they were helpless

in this situation and that escape was futile. These results were later transferred to theories of human behaviour and witnessed the emergence of cognitive psychology suggesting that what a person thinks plays a determining role in their behaviour. For a number of students interviewed as part of a doctoral study they, too, appear to demonstrate similar tendencies in the form of "learned hopelessness"; conditioned to think that the natural environment is deteriorating to the point of no return and there is little that can be done about it.

The study was conducted in five schools in Queensland, Australia and five in Saskatchewan, Canada. The number of students participating in the study totalled forty. All participants were public school students in year seven of their formal education. Each participating school had four students involved in the study who were interviewed individually and then later collectively as a focus group. The form and procedures in the interview process and, indeed, throughout all aspects of the study, were underpinned by a phenomenographical research methodology which utilises interviews as its primary mechanism for gathering data (Marton, 1988, 1994; Bruce 1994). Moreover, phenomenography was considered an appropriate framework because of its similarities to other studies which investigated conceptions of what can be referred to as subject matter or subject content (see for example Loughland, Reid & Petocz, 2002; Willmett, 2002) and is briefly described below.

All of the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts themselves were produced through a university approved research assistant in the first instance and then cross checked with the audio tapes by the researcher. After the tape recordings had been transcribed and coded, a search for similarities or differences in the experience of the phenomenon through the analysis of the data took place. Literature concerning phenomenographic studies suggest various, yet complimentary and quintessential, steps towards analysing and then categorising the descriptions revealed by the data (see Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991; Dean, 1994; Gerber, 1996; Marton, 1994; Marton, Carlsson & Halasz, 1992; Sandberg, 1996, 2000). The study being described here analysed the data through a five-stage iterative framework based on the work of Dahlgren & Fallsberg (1991) and Sandberg (1996). Figure 1 offers a visual description of the overall process (for a full description including discussions on "trustworthiness" and "reliability" see Nagel, 2005).

It was through this process of data collection and analysis that some interesting ideas and concerns unrelated to the primary research question surfaced. The most compelling of these centres on the theme outlined in this paper; that is, a sense of "learned hopelessness".

A number of students expressed great concern and duress with their perceptions of the state of the environment and the future. Consider the quotations on various environmental issues below:
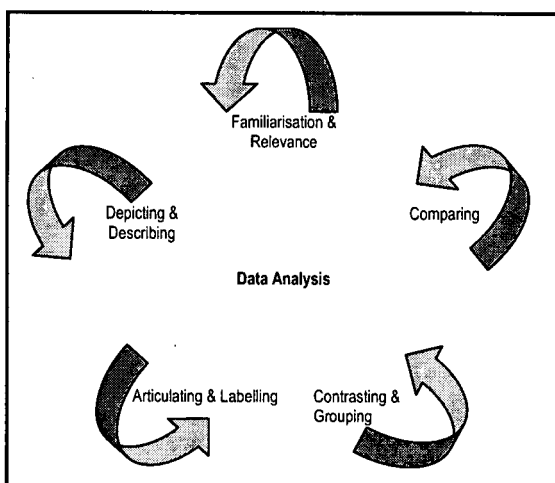

FIGURE 1: Data Analysis Process – An Iterative Endeavour

I was learning in class, I'm not sure what grade it was, 4 or 5, that we, if you pollute, it puts a little hole in the ozone layer and every time you pollute, it makes a little bigger hole and makes it a little worse and soon it will just tear through and it will just keep getting worse. It won't get better. It can't get better. It's just getting worse. (Paul – Canada)

Well pollution. Earth will probably get blown up or something and it's all dirty and we'll all die. (Camille – Australia)

It (pollution) affects our lives. When we grow up to be your age and the ozone layer is almost gone, then we're like screwed. (Brett – Canada)

Well we learnt about how people are ruining the environment, like leaving litter there and stuff and the animals eat it and they die. (Erin – Australia)

Because the ozone layer might grow bigger and the ice caps might melt and anything could happen and I think that it's just wrong that we hurt our children and their children and they did nothing. I think well that's just like what we're doing killing innocent people that we don't even know yet and they haven't really done anything to hurt the environment. (Jake – Australia)

These quotations are indicative of the sentiment of most of the forty participants involved in this study. There exists in their words a foreboding sense of a future that is not very promising for their generation or for generations to come. Their comments also reflect other studies in the field. Work by Barraza (1999) and Fleer (2002) examining children's views of their environmental futures suggest that children are indeed susceptible to negative feelings as a result of the environmental information with which they have been presented. Concurrently, Berryman (1999) citing the works of Sobel (1995) and Soulé (1988) found "when presented with overwhelming global problems at too young an age, children gain knowledge of environmental issues but are scared of the world" (p. 62). This "fear of the world" and susceptibility to negative emotions may arguably be constructing a sense of "learned hopelessness" unabated in the confines of traditional education contexts.

Many of the participants, both individually and collectively as focus groups, identified various media formats as their primary source of environmental information and often described this as their most significant EE experience. Over 50% of the cohort acknowledged the television and internet as significant factors in their EE. For some of the students, TV was also a tool used for classroom rigour in projects and assignments related to the environment. Considering the political nature of environmentalism, and the arguably subjective nature of television, this begs the question regarding the types of messages children are receiving, whether they should be receiving these in school, and whether they possess sufficient critical and analytical skills in deciphering the information presented to them. In the context of the study being discussed here, lack of such skills not only appear to be adding to a sense of "hopelessness", but also seem to be constructing apathy pertaining to the students' sense of agency or ability to do anything in the present for the benefit of their futures.

If It's Too Broke, Why Try to Fix It? The Construction of Apathy

When EE first appeared, one of its goals was "to create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups and society as a whole towards the environment" (UNESCO-UNEP 1978, p. 3). It is somewhat worrisome, then, to consider that after some thirty years

of development and implementation, there is evidence to suggest that the behaviours being created are not positive, to say the least. In the study contextualised in this paper, a majority of the students who discussed their ideas of EE believed there was little that they could do or wanted to do to combat environmental problems. Two students encapsulated this sentiment best when discussing the state of the environment:

> ... it doesn't affect my everyday life. Like it might in the future, if you ran out of trees or something but right now I'm just taking it one day at a time. Nothing really affects me. (Sara – Canada)

> I don't think it is a matter of not doing enough. I just think it's a matter of not enough people in class wanting to do something. (Jodie – Australia)

This apparent apathy has also been found in other studies. In their study of young people's environmental attitudes in Melbourne and Brisbane, Connell, Fien, Lee, Sykes & Yenken (1998) identified that the environmental concerns of their cohort of students were "mixed with frustration, cynicism and 'action paralysis'" (p. 95). These students, not unlike the students presented in this more recent study, believed that all they could do for the environment were small things like recycling and picking up rubbish. Moreover, these small acts are characterised as being more about futility and compliance than any sense of making a difference. It is safe to suggest that this sentiment, in conjunction with apathy, "action paralysis" or a sense of disempowerment are not the desired ends for EE. Consequently, it seems advantageous to engage in discussing the ontological concerns with EE that Payne (2003) rhetorically lays out as "what are we becoming" (p. 537).

It would seem that in trying to "help" the environment, the messages of environmentalism children encounter may in fact be doing more harm than good. Granted, the children in this study did acknowledge that they picked up rubbish and recycled, but as noted above, this hardly meets the goals of EE and may be more indicative of complying or appeasing some authority figure such as a teacher. More worrisome however, is that the children who participated in this study, on opposite sides of the globe, seem to be developing similar worldviews about the environment and their future that, at its best, is irrelevant, and, at its worst, is depressing. The knowledge these students seem to obtain and cling to can consequently be described as the fallout from the "knowing process". As a potential contributing factor to this "knowing process", EE may need to focus greater scrutiny on the educative aspects that are to be found in its philosophical foundations. The words of John Dewey lend emphasis to this need for introspection when he states that:

> In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young. Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter's nature will largely turn upon the direction children's activities were given at an earlier period. This cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth. (John Dewey, 1916, p. 41).

Reinvigorating the Future: Educating Against Apathy

From the outset, this paper has argued that children are at risk of developing personas of hopelessness and apathy in relation to their attitudes and understandings of the environment. Compounded with the pervasive messages of environmentalism vis-à-vis the media and technology, early findings mirror those found in previous research projects that suggest that children are fearful, apprehensive and perhaps suffering

from "action paralysis". EE in itself might unknowingly be complicit in instilling this sense of apathy and fear.

It has also been suggested that the contentious and ambiguous nature of environmentalism and education make for an uneasy partnership when merged together as EE. In the past it would appear that much of the impetus surrounding the didactics and pedagogy of EE embraced the environmentalist rhetoric of the time without fostering skills in analysing the implications of embracing such rhetoric without scrutiny. Perhaps now is the time for adjusting and fine tuning the focus of EE to embrace what it might mean to be an environmentally "educated" person. A good start would be to draw a bold line between education and advocacy whereby environmentalism is an ideology to study rather than a position to be adopted. The emphasis then is for environmental educators to engage students in an educative process rather than impose a particular set of values (Jickling & Spork 1998; Simmons 1996). Furthermore, "good quality" EE can avoid indoctrinating and leading students through scrutinising EE programs carefully and providing skills to examine any environmental policy or conception (Hart, Jickling & Kool, 1999).

Adopting an approach to EE that embraces such a philosophical position will not be easy given EE's history and the advent of the information age. Children today have far greater access and exposure to information and misinformation than at any other time. However, this only adds greater emphasis for a philosophy of EE that fosters autonomous thinking and the ability of students to participate intelligently in debates focusing on the environment (Jickling 1992). As Saul (2000) notes quite simply, "education should teach people how to think for themselves" (p. 7).

Furthermore, not only is it important to teach students how to think for themselves, but in so doing, EE must strive to eliminate "learned hopelessness" and apathy. Approaches towards "pro-environmental behaviour" or other contemporary manifestations of EE still maintain a philosophical dichotomy whereby being "pro" something suggests students must therefore be "anti" something else. In the end there still exist remnants of an "us" against "them" paradigm mirroring the rhetoric of environmentalism. And while trying to find the seemingly elusive pathway towards the goals of EE, this road may be smoother if educators were to "keep environmentalism out of environmental education" (Zeph, 1998, p. 2) or at the very least "question the idea that schools be places in which to reform society" (Berryman, 1999, p. 51). Underpinning such endeavour might be a conceptual framework encapsulating the spirit of John Hay (1998) who states, "I want to be freed from the assumption that we can carry the world on our shoulders" (p. 52). The children in the study discussed above certainly appear to need this sense of emancipation but so too perhaps does EE. It will need to consider carefully its place in providing quality educational experiences that counteract this sense of hopelessness, or risk becoming nothing more than an antiquated accomplice in gloom, hopelessness and apathy.

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