Recycling the flavour of the month: environmental education on its third time around

Environmental education has soared to flavour of the month status as an issue of national government interest on three occasions in the past two decades, but on each occasion its popularity has slumped after a relatively short period.

Each of the three growths in acceptance of environmental education as a national priority activity of some kind have been associated with a rational scientific approach to environmentalism. Such an approach is associated with major planning, research, management and educational strategies aimed primarily at accommodating the conservation of natural resources with economic development. Such strategies include the World Conservation Strategy (1980), the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (1983), the World Commission on Environment and Development Report (1987) and the Commonwealth discussion paper on ecologically sustainable development (1990). "The objective is to create a better environment, but without changing anything quickly or fundamentally" (Hart 1990: 58).

The first time environmental education gained flavour of the month status was in the early 1970s, and was stimulated mainly by scientists' concerns. It was reflected in the 1973 (and subsequent) Australian Labor Party platform statement (as quoted in Langmore (1987: 7)): "This (environmental education) policy aims to facilitate public participation and awareness of the need to preserve the environment by *One* funding and expanding environment (sic) education and information programs; *Two*, further developing the environmental education function in the curriculum development centre." (The CDC was established in 1973.)

The second soaring was in the early 1980s and, with hindsight, was of a limited nature. It was stimulated by the release of the World Conservation Strategy in 1980 which received sufficient political support to result in the development of the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (NCSA) in 1983. In the NCSA one of the "strategic principles" was to "Educate the community about the interdependence of sustainable development and conservation" (DHAE 1984: 16) and the first priority national action to achieve the objectives of the NCSA, under the heading of "Improving the capacity to manage" (DHAE 1984: 17), was to: "Develop and support informal education and information programs ... which promote throughout the community an awareness of the interrelationships between the elements of the life support systems and which encourage the practice of living resource conservation for sustainable development". This is a very instrumental statement for the task of environmental education. In 1985, insensitive to my own incorporation into the rational scientific hegemony, I actually described the NCSA as a "new beginning for environmental education in Australia"! However I made this statement from within the Commonwealth environment ministry; environmental education was not treated as a flavour of the month by the Commonwealth education ministry on this occasion (with the exception of the re-created Curriculum Development

Centre taking the ALP platform seriously and publishing an environmental education bulletin (Fien undated, circa 1987) as part of its Bicentennial Australian Studies Schools Project).

The third surge was in the late 1980s and was stimulated in part by the World Commission on Environment and Development report (1987), hence the Commonwealth discussion paper on ecologically sustainable development (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 1990: 19) where again education is seen in very instrumental terms:

> Public education campaigns can help in modifying behaviour to reduce demand for products with adverse environmental consequences and encourage the use of less damaging alternatives. The emergence of green consumerism attests to the ability of public education to modify consumption patterns. School programs are an important element of public education because they help shape basic attitudes and encourage responsible behaviour at an early stage of development.

At this time scientists were also expressing concerns about the greenhouse effect, which was influencing government interest in the environment, and there was growing broad community concern for the quality of global and local environments. This surge of interest in the environment and environmental education resulted in the Commonwealth launching a national environmental education strategy, "Learning for Our Environment", which involved The Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training making grants of $400 000 for some environmental education activities in November 1989 (see *ozEEnews* 1990: 1). This was the first and last that was heard of the national strategy. Government recognition of public concern about the environment was also influential in environmental education being included in the Australian Education Council's (AEC) national goals of schooling (1989) - where the relevant goal states "[to develop in students] an understanding of balanced development and concern for the global environment" - and in the AEC funding the environmental education curriculum materials audit and curriculum mapping exercise. For a while, environmental education was a distinct area of learning for national collaborative curriculum activity, but at its meeting in April 1991 the AEC demoted environmental education and amalgamated it with Study of Society and Aboriginal Studies to form the "Studies of Societies and Environment" learning area. It is interesting to note that although there is now widespread community involvement in environmental matters, the environment seems to have disappeared from the community's priority concerns (as expressed in public opinion polls) and, coincidentally, environmental education has slipped as a priority area of government interest.

A major concern for many of us involved in the practice of environmental education is that all of these national statements supposedly supporting environmental education are, by focusing on a rational scientific knowledge oriented approach to environmental education, not addressing environmental education as it is described in the literature emanating from the United Nations or from many scholars in the field. The goals statement from the AEC does not

address the behaviour change aspects of environmental education that are mentioned in the discussion paper on ecologically sustainable development, nor does it address the pedagogical aspects of it. That this situation has not changed in two decades is a concern.

The origins of the environmental education movement in Australia can be traced to the Australian Academy of Science conference on "Education and the Environmental Crisis" held in April 1970 (which is where the term "environmental education" had its first formal recognition and use). Environmental education, as the conceptions of it evolved from this and other similar forums, was seen in very instrumental (or rational scientific) terms: "What is needed is not only a fuller understanding of the biosphere, but a new sense of values, a new perception of our own role and responsibilities in and for the biosphere...Our only hope is that this new understanding may develop through the education of old and young" (Frankel 1970: 8). This approach is perhaps to be expected given that it was the scientists who were calling for environmental education as an essential response to the perceived environmental crisis of the time. This crisis was being highlighted by people such as Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich and through events such as the Torrey Canyon incident.

At the international level scientists were making similar statements to Frankel. Also in 1970, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) developed its definition of environmental education (as quoted in Greenall Gough 1981: 66-67):

> Environmental education is a process of recognising values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the interrelatedness among man, his culture and his biophysical surroundings. Environmental education also entails practice in decision-making and self formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality.

This statement does however suggest a little more than what was envisaged by Frankel; it indicates that there was a perceived need to increase the environmental content of educational programs *and* to change the pedagogy of the education programs. That environmental education has these two different components was further developed in later Unesco/UNEP conferences and documents.

Environmental education first became a priority for federal government educational efforts in 1973, when it was designated as one of five priority areas for curriculum materials development for the newly established Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). From the beginning, however, its development at CDC was subject to political posturing. Educators, especially those in bureaucracies, did not give it the importance its CDC priority status would have suggested. According to the then Principal Executive Officer of the CDC Interim Council (and now Secretary of the Northern Territory Department of Education), many academics viewed environmental education as a cultural rather than an educational priority and several council members (including some directors-general of education) regarded it more as a political priority. In their opinion, the

curriculum was already "overcrowded" and environmental education could be accommodated within existing subjects (Spring, as reported in Greenall 1981).

Because of political problems generally beyond its control, the CDC environmental education program did not really get underway until 1977, and there were not any products from it for schools to consider until 1980. Public concern about environmental matters was strong in the early to mid- seventies, but as this concern waned later in the seventies so did the national political priority of environmental education, and it lost whatever flavour of the month status it had had with the federal government. By the time the CDC environmental education program's publications were appearing environmental education has been deleted from the active program of the Centre: "The Director and Council believed that sufficient resources had been devoted to environmental education and that other competing areas were growing in importance" (Greenall 1987: 9).

Fensham has also noted "the loss of steam that had occurred in 1976/7 for EE in Australia" (1987: 20). His description of the status of environmental education in 1977 (Fensham 1987: 22) makes an interesting comparison with the situation in 1991 because little if anything seems to have changed:

- education in or about the environment was not enough: the need was for education for the good health of the environment
- we were not to see ourselves as apart from but as an integral part of the Australian environment(s)
- environmental education was to be real environmental problem-focused education rather than theoretical or abstract problem focused as commonly are other school disciplinary studies
- EE was accepted as not being a descriptor that was used for its type of knowledge but it was much less clear what this meant or how it could be related to formal education, which had (and has) a structure and epistemology that is rooted in disciplinary knowledge
- action and learning were seen as being symbiotic aspects of EE in all its stages - a very different pedagogical view from that which prevails in much of substantial learning
- the framework of EE has a stronger balance between cognitive learning, skill learning, and affective learning than is acknowledged for most other academic disciplines
- "affective learning" included affection for, interest in, concern about, commitment to, and senses of urgency in relation to the environment
- there was a strong sense that learners in EE had to get out of their cloistered classrooms and experience at least some of the environmental situations with which their EE was concerned.

The problematic, contested and emergent nature of environmental education in the framework Fensham described is repeated in a recent interview with six practitioners (Skelton 1991) the title of which says it all: "Environmental Education: No Unified View". The stream of environmentalism being hinted at

by Fensham in statements such as "we were not to see ourselves as apart from but integrally part of the Australian environment(s)" and " Action and learning were seen as being symbiotic aspects of EE in all its stages - a very different pedagogical view from that which prevails in much of substantial learning" is more in keeping with the "goal" approach to environmentalism described by Hart (1990: 58, quoting Slocombe) than with a rational scientific approach. This environmentalism approach is seen by Hart (1990: 58) as "a rebellion against the scientific, managerial rationality, to the extent that it makes concern for the environment a philosophy and demands *action* to save the environment now, through concepts such as participatory democracy and decentralisation". Proponents of this approach include the deep ecology movement, "Earth First" activists and other green environmentalist groups. This approach has not received wide acceptance in Australian education systems, with the possible exception of Earth Education which sees itself as an alternative to environmental education (van Matre 1990: 47), but that is another story.

Consistent with the latter approach described by Hart, environmental education can be seen as concerned with developing a curriculum which encourages the practice of just, participatory and collaborative decision making and involves critical analysis of the development of the nature, forms and formative processes of society generally and of the power relationships within a particular society: revealing how the world works and how it might be changed. As Huckle (1986: 12) states, "it is about critically examining the economic and political processes shaping the social use of nature within different, but inter-related societies and helping pupils recognize the struggles of those working for greater democracy and an improved environment".

It was soon recognised that the implementation of environmental education within the formal curriculum was not a simple task as it did not fit the traditional social reproduction (or transmission) curriculum. Its content was seen as being interdisciplinary, which was difficult enough, but it was also concerned with values ("to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment" was an objective of environmental education contained in the Tbilisi Declaration (Unesco 1978: 27)) and was "to provide social groups and individuals with an opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working towards resolution of environmental problems" (Unesco 1978: 27) which science (and many other) teachers did not feel confident to handle, so the difficult bits of values, participation and decision making were left out and the relatively uncontroversial ecological content retained. In addition there was the problem that environmental education "should adopt a critical approach to encourage careful analysis and awareness of the various factors involved in the situation" (Unesco 1980: 26). A socially critical approach to education is encouraged by the environmental world view embedded in environmental education rhetoric, however such an approach was most incompatible with the predominant socially reproductive curriculum, so it was ignored too.

Environmental education can thus be seen to be political both in its intent (a desire to be critical of and to transform society) and in its treatment by governments and systems at all levels.

Huckle (in press) suggests that a socially critical pedagogy in the emancipatory mould (Giroux 1983), which seeks to empower students so that they can democratically transform society, as the most suitable approach for environmental education in schools. He sees it as having the following characteristics:

- learning is active and experiential;
- classroom dialogue introduces elements of critical theory and encourages pupils to think critically;
- pupils begin to see themselves, their histories and futures, in new ways. They develop a sense of their own power to shape their lives;
- values education develops comprehension of the sources of beliefs and values, how they are transmitted, and the interests they support;
- pupils reflect on the structural and ideological forces that influence and restrict their lives and on democratic alternatives;
- pupils are taught how to act democratically with others to build a new social order.

Such an approach would enable students to pursue the ecological and other content of environmental problems, and engage the problems, in a much more satisfactory and meaningful context than the present knowledge based curriculum. In a socially critical pedagogy, students, teachers, parents and the wider community can all be involved in the practice of just, participatory and collaborative decision making, as noted above.

But socially critical pedagogy does not overtly seem to be the direction being adopted for the "clever country". Rather the future for Australian education seems to be very economy-driven and much more aligned with the scientific rational approach to environmental education enunciated in recent statements such as the Commonwealth discussion paper on ecologically sustainable development (1990). Instead of indulging in wholesale acceptance of these statements as the direction for environmental education and being led by the environmental content, we should be more closely examining our pedagogy, that is if we do want to achieve the goal of education for the environment.

In conclusion, despite my long history of involvement in environmental education at all sorts of levels, I think I now I hope that the fourth time round for environmental education will never come: the adoption of a socially critical pedagogy in schools may obviate the need for it. By adopting a socially critical approach schools would be able to involve themselves in a wide range of green and social justice issues that are consistent with participatory democracies, collaborative decision making and liberating the curriculum.

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