

A Plea for Environmental Education That Focuses on Learning to Care

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ABSTRACT Much has been published on environmental education towards sustainable development. Research reports on a “plateauing” of positive environmental attitudes, and while environmental problems are perceived to be worsening, people seem to be less inclined to participate in actions to express their dissatisfaction about global environmental issues. The most influential factor for developing a personal concern for the environment was reportedly established through childhood experiences in the natural environment. Technology has, however, had a marked influence on childhood experiences. The stimulation of increasing factual knowledge and dramatic visual images has an important influence on the development of values. The task of teachers who are concerned about the environment has grown. Ideally, teachers should adopt a committed stance in teaching children an ethic of care so that they may participate in personal and social changes that are needed for a sustainable environment. This paper reviews research into ethical and pedagogical issues involved in teaching for an ethic of care in environmental education.

INTRODUCTION

History relates the story of a “fragile earth under stress from human action and in need of care and protection from an imagined global community” (Macnaghten 2003: 65). Decades before this statement of Macnaghten was published, Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* (1962) raised the issue of human impact on the environment, particularly the use of chemical pesticides. Carson was an advocate of nature and environmental ethics, and though her book raised awareness it was only thirteen years later that the Belgrade Charter (1975) advocated education directed at solving social and environmental problems that flow from poverty, hunger and exploitation. The Charter proclaims a new global ethic “which espouses attitudes and behaviours for individuals and societies which are consonant with humanity’s place within the biosphere” (Unesco-UNEP 1976: 1-2). Two years later the world’s first intergovernmental conference on environmental education (EE) was held in Tbilisi. The conference was organised by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in cooperation with the United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP) and resulted in the adoption of the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO 1978) that included twelve guiding principles for EE. These principles have

formed the crux of EE since their conception. Since the adoption of these guiding principles for EE much research has been done on EE resulting in a continuous change in focus. It is because of its evolving nature that EE can be interpreted and implemented in various ways and still continues to develop (Pace 2010). To provide further background to this, an overview of the development of EE is subsequently provided.

Development of EE

EE has undergone several changes since the Tbilisi Conference. Traditionally, EE was offered as nature study, conservation education and outdoor education (Moroye 2009). Subsequently EE evolved into ecological education, social ecology and more recently, education towards sustainable development. An important feature of EE and environmentalism *per se* is that it is value-driven – people are often a description of what the ideal world should be like for example, living in harmony with other species; fair sharing of resources and caring for future generations, but the “sense of *movement* which might take us from the present world to the desired better one”, is often missing (Macnaghten 2003:66). Research reports on a “plateauing” of positive environmental attitudes, and while en-

vironmental problems are perceived to be worsening, people seem to be less inclined to participate in actions to express their dissatisfaction about global environmental issues. In addition, much has been published on EE and on sustainable environmental development. The concept is not new in academic circles, yet these numerous publications have seemingly not resulted in positive changes in behaviour towards sustainable environmental development.

However, “[t]he onset of an ecological worldview has permanently changed how people think. The importance of the environment to the health of the human species has become almost incontestable” (Hart 2003: 22). If human development threatens sustainability, it may be necessary to go back to the drawing board and reflect on EE’s guiding principles; particularly that EE should “relate environmental sensitivity, knowledge, problem-solving skills, and values clarification to every age, but with special emphasis on environmental sensitivity to the learner’s own community in early years” (UNESCO 1978: 27). This is reiterated by Suzuki (1997) who believes that to re-discover human connectedness with the earth, we need to begin with the education of children. It is therefore necessary to get children involved in caring for the environment at an early age in a holistic manner to reinforce an ethic of care.

What is an Ethic of Care?

Stanley (1985) defines an ethic of care as adopting values like a positive self-image; acceptance of, and respect for others; compassion and kindness; open-mindedness; respect for human rights; concern for justice; commitment to sustainable development, and a willingness to be involved. Stanley further contends that learning is not purely cognitive, because all knowledge has a moral dimension to it; therefore children need to learn to care about particular values and issues, as well as to care about themselves, about others and the environment. Learning should be personal and purposeful. Goralnik et al. (2012) assert that finding motivation to care, understanding the role of self-reflection in learning and developing relationships are all relevant experiential outcomes. Noddings (2012) summarises the concept of care as a conceptual and emotive understanding; as a positive regard and respect for the feeling and intrinsic

value of other persons, animals, plants and non-living things and recognition of their rights; and the motivation, willingness and skills to act to protect and enhance these feelings, values and rights.

Noddings (2012) views care essentially as a relationship between a *carer* and the *cared-for*. The carer is usually attentive, in other words listens, observes and is receptive to the needs of the other. The carer ought to respond to these needs and make appropriate interventions as needed. The ‘cared-for’ would respond or react in a way that shows that the caring act has an influence and has been received or experienced. Reciprocity and mutuality are important in this relationship. The ethic of care is a context-based, relational ethic that roots moral development in relations between a *carer* and the *cared-for*. “In this approach...right action depends on the needs of an ‘other’ in relationship, rather than on prescribed rules of good and bad and right and wrong. Moral development is rooted in embodied experiences – a context-based approach that resonates with experiential education” (Goralnik et al. 2012: 419-420). The implication is that the experience and exposure of both the carer and the cared-for to particular influences will result in specific interpretations and reactions.

Establishing an Ethic of Care for the Environment

Macnaghten (2003) contends that although environmental problems are perceived as worsening, people are less likely to engage in public action. There seem to be separate groups campaigning for different causes, but in general there is no coherent response from these groups or interaction with the general public to share values and beliefs about care for the environment. Although Macnaghten’s contention relates to the situation in the United Kingdom, the same can be said about countries elsewhere in the world. The ‘value-action’ gap is the result of a form of inquiry into the environment with its connections to everyday practices (Macnaghten 2003: 64). This gap needs to be bridged by an ethic of care for the environment.

Mortari (2004: 110-111) agrees that there is a need for an ecological ethic to care for the environment as a whole and that children need to be taught accordingly. Traditional ethics deal with

relationships between human beings. Human beings, however, have the power to affect natural processes, both outside themselves and within, in ways that can negatively influence the future. Therefore an ethics that includes responsibility should be extended to the natural environment and human relations with it. Human beings should consider themselves as part of nature (holistic view) and every being in nature has an intrinsic worth (bio-centric view). Respect should be one of the fundamental characteristics of such an ethical position. Authors such as Noddings (1992) prefer the notion of an ethics of care and not the more male notion of an ethic of justice where codes and rules apply. In an ethics of care every life form is respected, because of a moral disposition towards caring.

Teaching ‘Care for the Environment’

Tanner (1974) is of the opinion that children need to get to know and love the natural world before they will care for it. They will learn to know and love the world around them through the example and teachings they encounter at home and at school. Family members and other adults such as teachers have an important influence on inspiring and nurturing a concern for the environment (Palmer and Suggate 1996). Consequently, positive interactions with nature are very important for holistic, healthy child development. Children learn the ‘soul-making’ aspects of human development such as the appreciation of beauty, mystery, wonder and care (in the context of this paper) through experiences in the natural environment (Wilson 2008).

Children also need to have opportunities to explore their relationship with the natural environment experientially so that they can re-evaluate their environmental values in personal contexts where these values matter. Learning must be both cognitive and affective – experience sparks an emotional connection with learning material and emotion directs attention that leads to better learning. “Environmental ethical learning should cultivate both an appreciation for the role environmental ethics play in environmental decision-making, as well as a sense of responsibility to address issues” (Goralnik et al. 2012: 414). In teaching this ethic of care for the environment, it is necessary to consider the local or personal space of children, as well as their overall or outside space.

Personal Space – Home and Everyday Life

According to Macnaghten (2003:69) people currently live in a more individualised society – people care less about ‘saving the planet/the whale/the tiger’ and more about their personal environments. Individuals often try to find personal solutions to global problems that should be dealt with on a broader scale and the result is a disillusionment causing them to withdraw from the problems with apathy and resignation, because of a feeling of helplessness. “The environment becomes meaningful when it engages with social life, inhibiting or facilitating the development of ongoing human relationships, whether in the context of the family, friends or communities of interest” (Macnaghten 2003:80). Accordingly, in an effort to establish an ethic of care, there is a need to take note of people’s concerns for “themselves, their families and localities as points of connection for the wider, ‘global’ environmental issues” (Macnaghten 2003: 80-81).

The most important influence that inculcates this ethic of care and love for the environment in children is outdoor experiences, especially during childhood. Family and other adults play an important role in fostering an interest in the natural environment (Palmer and Suggate 1996). Much of childhood learning about the environment takes place informally in the daily lives of children and in conversation with adults at home, in the yard and in the neighbourhood. Noddings (2006) re-affirms this by stating that attitudes of curiosity and preservation can be nurtured from a very early age in a natural environment. Parents need to go into dialogue with their children about environmental issues, especially those problems influencing them directly. Some authoritarian parents, however, see their own opinions as the ultimate answer and simply do not engage in conversation with their children at all (Noddings 2006). This could be counter-productive and result in a defiant dislike and an opposition to caring for the environment.

Outside Space – School and Broader Environment

If the aim of environmental education is to “help children learn about and care for the environment, then those responsible for this subject area must know the types of learning experienc-

es that help to produce active and informed minds” (Palmer and Suggate 1996: 110). In this regard teachers should adopt a committed stance on an ethic of care for the environment to be able to teach children in such a way that they will participate in the personal and social changes needed to create a healthy and sustainable world (Fien 1997). Teaching is not a neutral process, but “purposeful and value oriented” (Fien 1997: 438). “Committed and responsible... teachers are preferable to those who claim neutrality for a curriculum which uncritically supports the existing order” (Huckle 1983: 152). Bak (1996 in Fien 1997: 441) proposes a “normative epistemology”, which means that teaching requires children to be exposed to learning experiences designed to have an affective impact, but using cognitive argument with selected values and principles (for example, respect, tolerance, commitment to sustainable development, democracy and peace) as criteria for ethical decision making.

Noddings (1984) claims that schools do not do their part to develop caring human beings, especially when it comes to caring for the environment. Children learn about ecosystems, food chains, and the extinction of species, but as these concepts do not link directly to their daily lives, the concepts remain academic and become irrelevant to the children. When EE issues are treated on a global level and in an abstract fashion they lose impact, whereas the ecology of children’s own backyards may have greater value and impact. “For students who have a yard or hope to have one in future, critical questions abound: What creatures live there? How does my life affect theirs? Where do all these creatures find shelter? How can we achieve balance in our gardens? Should we reduce the size of our lawns and add shrubs and flowering plants that provide shelter for wildlife?” (Noddings 2006:68). The spaces where children live shape them and their attitudes about the environment and in return these spaces are shaped by their inhabitants. Noddings (1984) contends that the emphasis on knowledge acquisition, cognitive performance and measurable outcomes at the expense of learning to care about ourselves, others and all of nature contributes to the idea that we live in an uncaring world.

Fien (1997) explains that teachers play a vital role in consciousness-raising for respect and responsibility for nature and the global environment. He further explains the role of teachers in

teaching an ethic of care as firstly, a pro-active role involving planning to promote an ethic of care, engaging children in active ongoing reflection on issues and attitudes. Secondly, the teacher’s role should be circumspect – teachers can guide children, but not force them into accepting specific attitudes. Children need to be reflective and critical about the way they apply values, make decisions and take action. Environmental values education teaches particular values, but in an atmosphere of free and critical discussion protecting children from indoctrination and persuasion (Hart 2003). To achieve this, Noddings (1986 in Mortari 2004: 112) argues for a curriculum that is based on “centres of care” where children learn to care about themselves, their intimate others, associates and the non-human world (animals and plants). The practice of care beyond the human world is important; as is the implementation of caring behaviour and caring actions.

School children do not always have enough direct experiences to learn critical and reflective practices, but biographical accounts, fiction and poetry (Noddings 2006: 78) can activate children’s imagination. It is through “narratives, storylines, images, icons or metaphors” that environmental meanings are created (Macnaghten 2003: 67). Other resources such as pictures, films and television programmes can be used with great success to teach children about the impact of particular issues on the environment particularly on a global level. These media are of major importance in explaining how and why it is important to care for the environment and how all actions contribute to the overall future of the planet.

Critical and Reflective Attitudes in Caring for the Environment

Rokeach (1973) describes a value as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or desired state of existence is more preferable than others. Values are important principles in life and demarcate goals to work towards. Attitudes are derived from values and are expressed as views on particular situations. Attitudes mediate between values and action as indications of what should happen in specific situations/contexts. Attitudes that display a caring demeanour for the environment will lead to actions that will address threats to the environment. For this, critical and reflective thinking is essential.

Noddings (2006: 4) explains critical and reflective thinking as the assessment of arguments, but also as the “diligent and skilful use of reason on matters of moral/social importance – on personal decision making, conduct and belief.” Critical thinking includes all domains of human interest, also emotion and feeling. Passionate personal engagement combined with critical and reflective thinking should be the most successful way to address issues of concern.

According to Kyburz-Graber (1999) critical education is important to develop a caring character in a changing world. It allows children to explore social issues through questioning values, perceptions, attitudes and opinions and do so from a caring nature. They move beyond the norms of social boundaries whilst reflecting on issues. “A critical approach to local social issues creates meaningful contextual knowledge which does not gloss over conflicts and controversial opinions but opens up the discussion to further discourse” (Kyburz-Graber 1999: 417). However, the importance of care cannot be ignored in these discussions and discourses. Fien (1993) has distilled common features of critical approaches to EE, namely that it should emphasise a critical environmental consciousness; it should focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills focussing on real world problems; it should emphasise the development of environmental ethics based on sensitivity and care; it should focus on social action to help improve and maintain environmental quality; it should use teaching strategies consistent with its goals namely ‘critical praxis’ and ultimately care for the environment.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a plea to focus on care for the environment and to use the environment for learning. Through the environment children can learn about the resources that are important for human life, and ultimately, for sustainable development. By creating a sense of wonder and promoting attention to the beauty of the earth, a sense of nurturing can be stimulated, creating an ethic to care for the environment. Children need to connect with nature in the natural environment where they grow up. As unique human beings children like to touch, taste, pull, climb and dig out of curiosity. Their creativity and curiosity need to be nurtured, especially with

regards to the natural environment. An ethic of care for the environment will develop if children encounter positive experiences with the world of nature. They need to not only learn about nature, but through nature to care for nature and in so doing for the future of all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental education strives to raise a sense of awareness about environmental issues, about taking action and about striving towards sustainable development. It is, however, not enough to concentrate on mere transmission of knowledge and providing the necessary skills to take action. Teachers and parents should also work on an ethic of care by showing children how to care for plants and animals and for other dimensions of the environment too.

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