

Environmental Education and Politics: Snakes and Ladders Revisited

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Abstract

This paper revisits the history of environmental education in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s and draws parallels between these and current events in four countries, including Australia. It is argued that little has changed and that few environmental educators confront the inherently political nature of their work. It is concluded that environmental education activity must adopt a wider scope that includes political activity if progress is to be made.

Introduction

The title of this article makes reference to a work written by Annette Gough (Greenall, 1987) describing the history and progress of environmental education in Australia through the 1970s and early 1980s in terms of the board game Snakes and Ladders. In this game a player landing on a ladder makes rapid forward progress upwards towards the finish while the player who lands on a snake rapidly descends back towards the start again. I suggest that while the details of Annette's argument have changed in the intervening years the analysis remains as pertinent now as then, both in Australia and internationally. Further, this analysis has largely been ignored in much of the recent literature. In this article I intend to review the argument put forward by Annette Gough (Greenall, 1987), to demonstrate that little has really changed within the field, and to point to the general neglect of the political nature of environmental education and environmental issues in general in much of the contemporary environmental education discourse.

Background

Gough's (Greenall, 1987) article notes the political posturing of the early 1970s and the assertion then, as now, that the curriculum was, and is, overcrowded. She reports that despite the development of a comprehensive but realistic environmental plan by the Curriculum Development Center (CDC), little attention was given to the political ramifications of the suggestions and the unpreparedness of teachers in schools. Despite these reservations, noted in hindsight, the prospects for this plan seemed rosy until the CDC council deferred action on it. Despite it being considered a priority in 1975, no funding support for the plan was provided and with the defeat of the Australian Labor Government, support waned. A later review of activity in the field intended to reveal and then to share good practice showed that there was little to be described as

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good practice and that much of what was put forward as environmental education was merely school science. Despite this, an advisory network was set up and materials developed but by the time these were available the funding for the advisory network had run out so key support at the systems level was missing. The CDC's activities in environmental education were wound down in 1980 and the center abolished in 1981, but reconstituted again in 1983 by a new Australian Labor government.

Information from the Australian States (Greenall, 1987) paints a picture similar to that at the national level with the development of policy statements that remained unsupported by resources. Environmental education in schools remained in a neutralized form that did not challenge the dominance of the cultural views normally transmitted through schooling, seldom venturing beyond ecological issues to the social economic and political ways in which attitudes towards the environment are shaped. Few educators were prepared (in any sense) to face up to the cultural and organizational adjustments that are needed if we are to treat the environment and our fellow humans in more just ways. Rhetorical support but lack of real commitment is evident throughout the commentary (Greenall, 1987). Throughout this work too, it is clear that the decisions in support of or restraining educational activity are political and usually revolve around the lack of allocation of funding support for initiatives developed at the policy level. In short, the way we treat the environment is politically dependent and so is the way that environmental education is maintained on the periphery of formal education.

Recently Parallel Histories

This emergence of environmental education as peripheral arises clearly in a later report by Elliott (1995). In discussing the situation in the England he records an admission by a member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate that the positioning of environmental education on the periphery of education is deliberate. Lavery and Smyth (2003) provide a more recent analysis of the subtlety of educational constraints in describing attempts to initiate education for sustainable development in Scotland. This they summarize as marginalized by other priorities and falling funding, and note that while the initiative received a flurry of initial support at its launching, there was little evidence that the policy achieved any lasting effect. They note too the lack of a clear lead from government and increasing fragmentation of effort. They lament:

It is assumed that, in a society that recognizes the importance of sustainable development, a well-argued case for a well-structured policy on SDE will prevail. Sadly the progress of SDE in Scotland does not support this assumption.

(Lavery & Smyth, 2003, p. 377)

I suggest the flawed assumption here is that the espoused position on ESD constitutes social recognition of the concept rather than lip service. The report by Lavery and Smyth (2003) confirms to me that the commitments to the environment made by governments are largely rhetorical as many critical commentaries, particularly Huckle, (1993) suggest. In November 2000 the Scottish environmental education council was dissolved.

The New Zealand Case

The situation in New Zealand also parallels these experiences. Guidelines for environmental education in New Zealand schools were released in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999). In 2000, funding was devoted to a national project training teachers to use the document and further funds voted to the establishment of a national advisory network over four years (announced July 2002 by the leader of the Green Party). Days

after this announcement the New Zealand Labour and Green parties split ranks over the release of genetically modified organisms and the future of this initiative remains unclear. It is not compulsory for schools to administer the guidelines but approximately \$6 million has been devoted to supporting their use between 2000 and 2006.

In 2001 the government initiated a curriculum stocktake project and in its report (Ministry of Education, 2002) education for a sustainable future is suggested as one of a number of key themes against which the curriculum should be audited. This encouraging move looks very much like a ladder. However, in a more recent statement of educational priorities emerging from the Office of the Minister of Education (New Zealand Government, 2003) the word sustainability does not appear. Instead the Minister's priorities for 2003-2006 focus on improving economic competitiveness through education and exhibit complete faith in globalization to usher in a new age of prosperity for everybody. This is despite the fact that the stocktake report documents the growing educational disparity between rich and poor, and that the growing global disparities are widely acknowledged (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2004).

During this period the Ministry of Education commissioned an extensive research project evaluating its initiatives in environmental education. Despite the fact that it is not amongst his priorities for education, the Minister had no qualms about releasing the report of this project (Bolstad, Cowie & Eames, 2004) in mid-April, 2004, as ground breaking research in environmental education. In fact it is nothing close to ground breaking. It contains an overview volume and three supporting volumes comprising a literature review, a set of case studies of school practice, and a "critical stocktake" of effective environmental education practice in New Zealand schools. Part of the problem with the research is that its terms of reference limit its scope to the "aims" of environmental education. These are found in the Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 1999) and can be recognized as a neutralized form of the Objectives from the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978). Further, the work generally assumes that effective practice is that which develops these aims. It shows no acknowledgement of the extensive debate on the gaps between attitudes and knowledge, and pro-environmental behaviour that has received particular profile in the literature in recent years. The report also makes many of the mistakes documented by Greenall (1987). In not defining what environmental education is, and assuming best practice is good practice, the report is vague and poorly focused. Overall the four volumes contain no critical commentary and stop short of recommending that environmental education should be part of the formal curriculum.

A similar literature review by Rickinson (2001), also conducted by a state supported research agency, is criticized by Ried and Nikel (2003) because it does not contain a disinterested commentary. This is a criticism that resonates with the New Zealand report where the examples of good practice are, with one exception (see Papprell, 2004), nature study and school grounds projects. These have been widely criticized (Huckle, 1991; Fien, 1997; Lousley, 1999) as failing to address issues of cause, depoliticising environmental issues, and being insufficient responses to the challenge of sustainability.

The situations being described here are virtually identical to the Greenall's descriptions from over twenty years ago. In which environmental education is promoted in a neutralised form that seldom engages with social, political, economic and environmental interdependence. It is not surprising that Oulton and Scott (2000) observe that, after thirty years of effort in environmental education, it is difficult to see what has been achieved.

Environmental Education in Australasia

The point in raising these issues is to highlight that while Annette Gough (Greenall, 1987) went to pains to elaborate the political nature of environmental education, the message has been largely ignored. Having attended both the New Zealand Association for Environmental Education conference in January 2004 and the Effective Sustainability Education conference, convened in Sydney in February 2004 by the New South Wales Council on Environmental Education, I have become acutely aware of the lack of political analysis or discussion occurring. This is a gap that is also noticeable in the international literature. Much of the work being shared consists of micro level initiatives that are apolitical and thus support the status quo, and exhibit complete faith in education to address the environmental crisis. I am not aware of any evidence to support this faith and would return to the statement by Oulton and Scott (2000) mentioned above in support of this assertion.

Two keynote addresses at the Sydney conference flirted with a deeper analysis. Greg Bourne saw three barriers to change that he identified as “structural, political and behavioral” (Bourne, 2004, p. 4). His development of these ideas, however, was non-existent. Daniella Tilbury dwelt briefly on the need for “practical, policy and paradigm” change. She has since reshaped this alliterative trilogy as “Power, Politics and Participation” (Tilbury, 2004, p. 14) but provides little elaboration of what these mean in educational situations. Grappling with trilogies of ideas is not uncommon in the field. Jensen and Schnack (1997) suggest that school programmes need to consider not only pedagogical issues, but also to engage learners with the structures that contribute to environmental problems and the forces that drive these. They emphasize that it is not for students in schools to reshape politics and that environmental action serves an educative rather than reconstructive purpose. Pieters (2003) suggests too that attention needs to be afforded to the micro level of pedagogy, the meso level of school organization and the macro level of national standards and curriculum in developing programmes.

Jensen and Schnack (1997) raise a complex issue for all education is “political”. Environmental issues also have implications at the “Political” (that is, electoral politics) level. Jensen and Schnack appear to be referring only to the latter level. Neither they nor Pieters generalize their ideas into a useful overview strategy.

Three Levels of Reflection

Building on the philosophy of critical realism mentioned by Huckle (1993) and discussed as a pedagogical strategy by Plant (2001), I suggest that environmental educators could benefit from undertaking critical reflection at three levels. The first considering the nature of their daily practice, the second reflecting on the nature of the organizational structures and rules (such as curriculum or school review) that shape, support or restrain their practice, and at the third level on the social economic and political forces that shape both. This goes beyond notions of assessment and curriculum mentioned by Peiters (2003). It has been argued that failure to address causes of problems will negate the value of the educational endeavour (Huckle, 1991; Jensen & Schnack, 1997). I am suggesting that cause must be analysed at these three levels. The three levels of activity need to be addressed both within pedagogy and in supporting environmental education in general. It is my contention that these three levels of analysis are rarely conducted. The quote from Lavery and Smyth (2003) mentioned above, for example, does not seem to have considered that the role of the state involves placating the electorate and maintaining the status quo, and that environmental

education challenges the dominant economic paradigm. Political muscle is required as a catalyst for social change I suggest, and education by itself may be insufficient.

There is not space here to provide a full justification for this position. Instead I look to some examples of exemplary practice to see what lessons can be drawn from them. I turn again to the proceedings of the Sydney conference mentioned above for this evidence.

Good Practice

I wish to report on my interpretation of three contributions to the Sydney conference, the title and theme of which was; *Effective Sustainability Education: What works? Why? Where next? Linking research and practice*. Not all the material reported here is available for scrutiny, however, the three examples shed interesting light on the proposal of three levels, or loops, of reflection made above.

The three initiatives were a science education initiative conducted in Victoria, a road safety education initiative and the Sustainable Schools Initiative, both conducted in New South Wales. All three were undertaken with state government support, full commitment by the educational institutions concerned, and involved support staff working closely with teachers to develop sound practice. Each functioned in a way that was legitimated at the deeper levels of social reality mentioned here in an endeavor to improve practice at the micro level. (Only one of these initiatives is reported in the conference proceedings.)

Road safety is, as reported by Stephen Waite, past coordinator of the initiative, a "Political" issue. Waite reported that concern about road safety is limited to the number of road deaths. Thus, although the road toll in comparison to the number of vehicles on the road and the distances driven has continued to drop very steeply, this is of little impact on the "Political" imperative to reduce the absolute number of fatalities. As a result, the Roads and Traffic Authority (NSW), Road Safety Branch project, enjoyed 6.5 million dollar annual budget. Waite reported that in pursuing their initiative they insisted on institutional commitment at the highest level and admitted that the project was resourced at a level that allowed them to buy their way into schools. Assured of commitment at the institutional level the project involved working with teachers to develop Social Studies topics using road safety as the context, much of the work being at local community level. The project used staff and resources to develop sound pedagogical approaches and practice using the road safety context.

Annette Gough (2004) reported on the Science in Schools Research Project that has now been adopted as School Innovation in Science in the state of Victoria. Very briefly this is a State funded initiative to improve the quality of science teaching occurring in schools that Gough reports as being at a lamentably low level. The project involved schools in developing a three-year action plan to address this issue. The project funding then allowed researchers to work with the schools to provide the professional development required to realize the Action Plan. This involved, among other things, a five-step action research spiral that began with the local community. The project, like the road safety initiative, sought to develop a model of effective teaching and learning and environmental education provided the context for this, "thus achieving two (political) agendas with minimum effort" (Gough, 2004, p. 7). Gough responds to Walker's (1995) criticism that the core function of schools is to develop numeracy and literacy and while these are under-developed environmental education will remain peripheral. Gough (2004) reports that the initiative raised science education to the same priority level as literacy and numeracy so that it is seriously addressed. While acknowledging the privileged resource status afforded the project, Gough notes, "a

space had been legitimated within the science Action Plan" (Gough, 2004, p. 8) to develop environmental education as a learning context for science within the schools.

The third project, the Sustainable Schools Project (SSP), was reported by the staff of the New South Wales Department of Conservation (DoC), led by Phil Smith from the DoC and Syd Smith from the New South Wales Department of Education (DET). It arises from the policy of the DET (Department of Education and Training, 2001) and specifies three focus areas of curriculum, management of resources and management of school grounds that government schools must address in moving toward sustainability. The policy requires schools "to achieve the objectives of environmental education" and "address all three focus areas in ways meaningful to their school communities" (Department of Education and Training, 2001, p. 12). In response to this policy the SSP recruited a pool of staff from the teaching profession to assist schools to develop a management plan outlining their strategies for meeting the requirements of the policy. Aside from the issue that schools are required to solve a number of vexing problems for which responsibility might be considered to lie elsewhere, significant effort was required in working with schools to develop the kind of collaborative culture required to address the comprehensive set of issues involved (Smith, personal communication, June 2004).

Significantly, in April 2004 the NSW State Government began a rationalization of the State organizations involved in the environmental arena. The result for the SSP has been a reduction of the resource allocation for this project for the next financial year along with the loss of significant personnel.

Whatever machinations have taken place behind the scenes, the result appears to be the downgrading of a potentially significant environmental education initiative. The policy constitutes an attempt to match the rhetoric of environmental education in the curriculum with school practices that contribute to the implicit curriculum. While a great deal of "Political" work was undoubtedly done to establish the policy that supports the SSP in the first place, the conclusion that I draw as an observer is that an insufficient level of "Political" backing has been available to sustain the project in the way that was visible in the previous two initiatives reported here. The future of the SSP is currently unclear.

What can be taken from these three initiatives is the importance of support at the three levels proposed (political, systems and practical) for any significant initiatives in schools. These initiatives confirm the suggestion made here that unless environmental education activity is pursued at all three levels it is unlikely to progress. Indeed the assertion here is that the lack of progress in the field is a result of this lack of engagement at these levels, and at the political level in particular. On the other hand, the work reported here optimistically suggests that if support at these three levels is secured the prospects for real progress are good. Sound initiatives must, I also suggest, address the same three levels within their pedagogical approaches. That is, school programmes also look past symptoms to the structures and causes that underlie environmental problems.

What seems crucial here is that it is only the Sustainable Schools Initiative that is explicitly identified as environmental education and this is the one that has come under threat. The other two use environmental contexts in addressing other important issues that might not be seen by many people as environmental education.

Conclusion

To return to the starting point then, it seems that little has changed in our field. Whenever a ladder seems to beckon and we rush towards it we find ourselves plummeting down an unseen snake. This has the effect of luring environmental

educators into continued cycles of effort that have little productive impact. The reasons for this are complex, however, I have suggested that governments' first commitments are to the status quo and that environmental education is a challenge to this and is political, as Annette Gough (Greenall, 1987) makes clear. I have asserted that there remains very little engagement with the political nature of education in general, and environmental education in particular, in much of the discourse of our field. I have put forward evidence from four countries that supports the view that environmental education generally remains marginalized within education, but also put forward examples of good practice that can occur when education is supported at the three levels I have proposed here. The lesson seems an obvious one. Until we engage with the political issues and develop a "Political" support base for changed attitudes regarding social and environmental justice, the game of Snakes and Ladders will go on.

Keywords: Environment, Education, Politics, Good practice, Critical reflection

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