BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY: SHOULD WE EXPECT MORE FROM EDUCATION?

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This paper examines limitations of using the term "sustainability" as an organizing concept, or aim, of education. I do acknowledge that in particular contexts sustainability is an important term; many ecological processes are not sustained. However, I also identify three problems associated with a sustainability-focussed agenda. First, I recognise the educational limitations of "education for sustainability," particularly the deterministic nature of this formulation. Second, I suggest that we should seek to avoid the intellectual exclusivity that a sustainability-oriented program brings. Finally, I discuss conceptual errors, reminiscent of Orwell's "doublethink," that are inherent in use of sustainability as an aim. Ultimately, I argue, sustainability cannot be an omnibus term. I conclude with a few suggestions about how we might nurture new directions in environmental education

Over the past decade there has been much talk, and some lively debate, over the terms 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability'. This includes a Canada-hosted on-line colloquium on the future of environmental education with a selection of papers published in Volume 4 of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (1999). More recently, another internet debate on education for sustainable development was initiated by the Dutch Inter-Departmental Steering Group on Environmental Education (1999). Nevertheless, those seeking to care for the environment and human-environment relationships have often sought goals and rallying concepts around which to organize their efforts. Beginning with the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) and followed by *Agenda 21* (1992), which was signed by 179 nations in Rio de Janeiro, adherents of sustainable development and sustainability have gained much momentum in their efforts to establish environmental guidelines and goal statements.

This momentum can be seen in the field of environmental education, particularly in the programmes and documents sponsored by UNESCO. Six months following Rio, a conference dubbed 'EcoEd' was convened in Toronto and billed as the first educational follow-up to the Brazilian meeting. More recently, a series of regional meetings were held in preparation for an international conference hosted by UNESCO and the Government of Greece at Thessaloniki in December 1997. The resulting proceedings (Scoullos, 1998) revealed that the conference had been organized to highlight "the critical role of education and public awareness in achieving sustainability" (Mayor, 1998:7). Moreover, the 'Declaration of Thessaloniki', distributed for participant adoption, reaffirmed UNESCO's preferred goals of 'education for sustainable development' and 'education for sustainability'.

In November 1997, I had the opportunity to attend the regional meeting for the global francophone community hosted in Montreal and called 'Planet ERE'. I was impressed by the vigour of the research and the critical stance taken by many participants who were not convinced of the efficacy and appropriateness of the UNESCO goals. Yet I am left to wonder, what became of this discourse? In spite of these, and a variety of other extant analyses of the sustainability agenda, a reader is hard pressed to find citations of such critiques in the 862 page proceedings from Thessaloniki.

Juxtaposed against this observation we have questions posed by Jarnet of Environment Canada (1998). After Canda's promise to implement Chapter 36's recommendations devoted to education, public awareness, and training, why do the recommendations remain so many and the implementations so few? She further ponders the nature and effectiveness of the terms 'education for sustainable development' and 'education for sustainability'. Are, she asks,

> these terms blueprints for a particular type of action which may actually constrain our possibilities? Or are they simply stepping stones in the evolution of our thinking about education? (Jarnet, 1998:14).

Put simply, do 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' provide suitable goals? Or, can we, as educators, create conditions for environmental thinking to continue to grow - to grow beyond reliance on 'sustainability'?

Following Jarnet's (1998) questions, the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, working together with Environment Canada, Université du Québec à Montréal, and Yukon College, hosted an on-line colloquium in October 1998 to discuss environmental education in Canada, and beyond. Many of the posted papers have been published in Volume 4 of this journal. Taken together, these papers provide readers with a broad range of perspectives and an interesting basis for further discussions about the evolution of our field. Interestingly, some authors felt quite comfortable with terms like 'education for sustainability' and sought to infuse this term with meaning, or to use it to address issues under-represented by environmental education (González-Gaudiano, 1999; Gough & Scott, 1999; Huckle, 1999). Others were clearly uncomfortable with the continued sustainability focus (Berryman, 1999; Sauvé, 1999). They expressed concerns about the 'globalising' nature of the 'education for sustainability' agenda and the need to nurture alternative perspectives. Yet another author, while recognising limitations to this terminology, sought means to accommodate the global political agenda (Smyth, 1999). As a tentative step in this direction, he spoke about "education consistent with Agenda 21".

I, too, have concerns as I question the future of 'sustainability'. Of course this is, in many ways, an important term. Many ecological processes are not sustained. Species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate and whole ecosystems are at risk. However, the degree to which the term remains helpful will depend on how well we recognise its short-comings as an organising concept. In this paper I will identify and discuss three pitfalls of a sustainability-focussed agenda. I argue that we must first recognise the educational limitations of education for sustainable development or sustainability.

Second, I believe that we should seek to avoid the intellectual exclusivity that such an agenda brings. And, third, I discuss the conceptual errors inherent in using sustainability as an aim. I argue that it is not an omnibus term, but rather, one with serious limitations. In answer to Jarnet's (1998) questions, I believe that 'sustainability' is a stepping stone in the growth and evolution of our thinking, and I will conclude with a few suggestions about how we might nurture this process.

LIMITATIONS

Determinism

Perhaps the inherent determinism in goal statements like 'education for sustainability' can best be seen in a recent quotation taken from the proceedings from the Thessaloniki conference. For its author, and other adherents, education

> should be able to cope with determining and implanting these broad guiding principles [of sustainability] at the heart of ESD [education for sustainable development] (Hopkins, 1998:172).

When highlighted in this way, most educators find such statements a staggering misrepresentation of their task. Teachers understand that sustainable development and even sustainability are normative concepts representing the views of only segments of our society. And, most teachers know that their job is primarily to teach students how to think, not what to think.

When I look more closely at this quotation, I find at least two problems. The first is the assumption that there might be something like a coherent and cohesive set of guiding principles that can define sustainability and infuse meaning into the term sustainable development. Second is the assumption that education is an instrumental endeavour that can be used to achieve pre-determined goals. Regarding the first point, the authors are clearly building their case on a very shaky foundation. According to recent work by the British political scientist Dobson (1996), there are now three hundred available definitions for sustainability and sustainable development. In light of this new evidence it seems that after a decade working to bring meaning to these terms there is less coherence and understanding, and perhaps more divergence, than previously imagined. The likelihood of arriving at some common understanding of these terms is more remote than ever. The more adherents attempt to infuse these terms with meaning, the more available definitions and the more confusion we seem to get. Moreover, the tenor of these definitions will be clearly dictated by the political persuasion of each adherent. Particularly alarming for many concerned with the global ecological imperative is the fact that most of the work on these concepts has been done in the economic sector (Dobson, 1996). The best we can hope for from the myriad possibilities is a tussle over whose conception of sustainability and/or sustainable devel-

opment ought to prevail.

However, as implausible as it seems that we might actually arrive at some consensus on suitable conceptualisations of sustainability and sustainable development, there is still a serious problem with the second assumption. Is it educationally justifiable to 'implant' a new normative system in to the minds of students? Imagine trying to implant the principles of Marxism into the heart of an American educational system! This would be clearly seen as indoctrination. While presented more subtly, this is precisely what is said when educators speak of education 'for' sustainability or sustainable development. In spite of the misgivings described in the previous paragraph, adherents are saying that they know best, and that their value system must prevail.

When 'educators' speak with such certitude, with such confidence in their ability to determine the best outcomes for students, they do not see sustainability and sustainable development as stepping stones to future visions; rather, the effect is to constrain possibilities. This approach also exposes educators to serious, and sometimes hostile, criticism. (See, for example the debate between Sanera, 1998 and Courtenay-Hall, 1998; Simmons, 1998; Smith, 1998 & Bowers, 1998). Clearly, if there is to be a future for sustainability within education, we must begin to recognise the educational limitations of the deterministic manifestations of the sustainability agenda. As Smyth (1999) has said, the practice of education labeled 'for' something should have been demolished by now.

Exclusivity

A number of years ago I began to explain why I did not want my children to be educated for sustainable development (Jickling, 1992). This critique has since provoked a variety of responses, many supportive, but some perplexed. Amongst the latter group are those who have wondered just what it is that I do want. The easiest, and still the best, reply has been to express my hope that in ten or fifteen years my children would not even consider a value system, a visionary formulation, or a management compromise that I might accept today. Again, this position can be expressed in terms of Jarnet's (1998) questions. I like to think that present ideas, such as sustainability and sustainable development, are just glimpses of an ongoing evolution of environmental thought. We are engaged in a process, and this process is threatened when proponents see these ideas as outcomes.

Leopold (1949) was an early advocate on behalf of an evolving conception of ethics. In his famous essay "The Land Ethic", he optimistically predicts that our ethical systems may one day extend to be inclusive of respect for, and duties towards, the land. Affirming his belief in this process, he went so far as to suggest that nothing so important as an ethic should be written down. More recently Weston revisited these ideas (1992). He argues that traditional ethics, concerned with human, and human-society, relationships, developed over hundreds of years. In this relatively well-established field there have evolved ethical systems which have matured and are now incorporated into many aspects of contemporary decision making and governance. By contrast environmental ethics, with its concern for duties and obligations to the more-than-human (following Abram, 1996) world, is relatively new and we just cannot predict in advance where this thinking will lead. To Weston, environmental ethics is in its originary stage and, for this reason it should be a creative, open-ended process. It must resist temptations to reflect particular normative stances, however enlightened or politically fashionable they claim to be. It must be allowed to grow. I agree.

If environmental thought and ethics are evolving processes, then our role as educators is to engage students in this process. Moreover, if environmental thinking is to continue evolving, and if my children are to be participants in an environmental discourse unimagined today, then we must resist temptations to exclude a wide suite of emerging ideas in favour of a sustainability or sustainable development agenda. I want my children to be exposed to a diversity of ideas. I want them to know about bioregionalism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, ecozoic thinking, Leopold's 'land ethic', environmental justice, social ecology and other emergent forms of environmental thought. Education should be about creating possibilities, not defining the future for our students. And, these creative possibilities can arise when we embrace exploration, evaluation, and critique of emerging ideas. In this way sustainability and sustainable development are best seen as only two of many stepping stones.

Conceptualisation

Much has been said about the difficult, if not impossible, conceptual nature of sustainable devel-

opment (e.g. Disinger, 1990; Jickling, 1992; Livingston, 1994). For many, a more viable option has been to shift focus to 'sustainability'. Indeed, this term has seemed unassailable. However, it is now important to look closely at problems associated with emphasising sustainability as an organising concept. I argue that as important as it is, this term is not sufficient to explain, or direct, our imperatives; it may even mask important distinctions. Once again, understanding the limitations of sustainability will enhance the future usefulness of this term. To illustrate my point I will draw from two scenarios that have emerged within my own community. The first is about the future of mining and the second concerns wildlife management.

It will be no surprise that citizens differ in their opinions about mining activities and the future of this industry. Embedded in their opinions are environmental, economic, and lifestyle issues. A number of years ago a group of school children embarked on a project to examine these issues in the context of mining. The fruits of their labour were revealed in a collection of letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Like anyone engaged in critique of difficult social issues, the children struggled to balance the environmental health of our region against economic interests and their own consumer desires. While some letters seemed naive, they did reveal an earnest desire to mediate tensions between competing interests. The results inevitably led to recommendations designed to moderate, not eliminate, mining.

Not surprisingly the mining industry responded with incredulity. Surely, we were told, the curriculum must be biased, and steps must be taken to correct the imbalance (Buckley, 1993). The result was an alliance between industry and government to produce a mining curriculum (Burke & Walker u.d.). It is not possible to critique their entire programme at this time, but for purposes of illustration I will consider images represented on the poster provided as part of the curriculum package to advertise its arrival into schools and to capture interest of the targeted children. The first thing an observer notices is that the image is full of happy people enjoying products derived from mining activities. Such images compliment the thematic slogan running across the bottom of the poster in large letters and reading, 'What is Mined is Yours'. Of particular interest is additional text that states, "at the heart of our modern lifestyle is a diverse and healthy mining industry".

While true that our society consumes many mining derived products, what is left unchallenged is the possibility that present consumptive lifestyles are not sustainable. In fact, the poster's implicit message is that present lifestyles ought to be sustained. This point is driven home by another example from my region. Here the 'Concerned Atlin Residents for Economic Sustainability' have mobilised to defend mining from the lobbying efforts of ecological activists (Simpson, 1999). Interestingly, what unites the environmental community arguing on behalf of regional ecology, and the mining community on behalf of economic development, is the word sustainability. Their differences are absorbed by use of this single term and the concept has become cliché. Now both ecologists and mining promoters can, with public approval, use the term sustainability to support radically different values.

Unfortunately, the mantra of sustainability has conditioned many to believe that this term carries unconditional or positive values. Yet critical thought depends on transcending elements in ordinary language, the words and ideas that reveal assumptions and worldviews, and the tools to mediate differences between contesting value systems. As the example illustrates, sustainability tends, instead, to flatten out contradictions. And worse still, it is leading us in the direction of Orwell's (1989) famously satirical notion 'doublethink' whereby ordinary citizens can increasingly hold in their minds contradictory meanings for the same term and accept them both. Seen this way sustainability tends to blur the very distinctions required to thoughtfully evaluate an issue.

The second example draws from a government decision to kill wolves in order to enhance caribou populations. This, too, was a controversial issue with a number of public voices. Some of these voices included First Nations representatives who supported the wolf kill arguing that freedom to hunt caribou is a deeply cultural experience. For these people, the ability to live with the land is closely linked to identity and well being. Other willing participants included local 'wildlife managers'. For many of these folks the central task is to find less intrusive ways of controlling wolves than shooting them from helicopters. Their interest often lies in the ever-more-effective utilisation of 'resources'. A third voice arises from members of the local fish and game association. They see themselves as hunters, along with wolves. It seems that both hunters and wolves deserve a share

of the caribou, but that the wolves take too big a share and must be managed. Finally, there are opponents to wolf kills. For many in this group, wolves are scapegoats for past excesses and poor management practices. For these opponents, wolf kills run contrary to care and respect for wildlife.

Of course, wolf kill programs are very complex and the purpose here is not to settle issues of public value. However, this brief introduction does reveal further pitfalls in the language of sustainability. In spite of differences between each of these voices, they would all be united by a desire for ecologically sustainable ecosystems, which include wolves. What is really at stake are questions about why particular sets of actions, derived from particular sets of values, should be privileged over others. Wolf kills, like other controversial issues, are not fundamentally about sustainability. Rather, they are about cultural identities, respect, society-nature relationships and tensions between intrinsic and instrumental values. Again, sustainability talk can mask such central issues.

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS

As we enter the new millennium, pressure for change will grow; this is an unavoidable reality. At the same time tensions between competing interests and divergent value systems will also grow. While educators can play an important role in preparing the next generation of citizens to mediate these tensions and create new possibilities, their actions will be scrutinised like never before. As the old saying goes, if we enable students to think, there is the danger that one day they might actually do it. At the heart of this joke is the realization that education can be threatening to those with vested interests in the *status quo*. To some a thinking public is troublesome. To survive, and be effective, environmental educators must become evermore thoughtful about their purpose, evermore vigilant about their weaknesses. This is not a time for leaping onto 'bandwagons' or grasping for new slogans.

I have acknowledged that sustainability is a useful term. It has the capacity to capture important issues and inspire imagination. But, as I have shown, it alone is not sufficient to organize the educational preparation of thoughtful students and citizens, who will need to examine and evaluate complex issues. I have described some of the limitations of the language of sustainability. We ignore these limitations at our peril; our critics will not. Sustainability, and discussions such as this, can however lead to new possibilities - provide a stepping stone for the evolution of our ideas. In this section, I provide a few modest suggestions that may help to refocus our direction and nurture growth in our field.

First, we must be less deterministic. The kind of determinism discussed here is easily identifiable (e.g. Sanera, 1998a & b) but not so readily defended. We will more justifiably speak about education 'and' sustainability, education 'concerning' sustainability, or as Smyth (1999) has suggested education 'consistent with' Agenda 21. These are but a few possibilities that are less ideologically bound and thus stand on a more solid educational footing. These simple adjustments, or others like them, can diffuse some criticism and allow students the intellectual space to move beyond sustainability if they judge this necessary.

Second, we can seek more inclusive language. There are many scholars and citizens who do not feel at home in the sustainability, or sustainable development, 'club'. Others are simply cynical. Most important, however, are the myriad formulations of other possibilities for environmental thought. Environmental ethics, ecofeminism, and social ecology are all fields in their infancy; let us not cut short the possibilities they, and other emergent fields, offer by focusing so heavily on sustainability. For a start, when we describe environmental education programs for the 21st Century let us speak more inclusively about the importance of examining society-environment relationships.

Finally, complex environmental issues are about more than sustainability; this concept alone is too limited to capture the essential issues in environmental education. For example a Mexican colleague speaks about her grassroots project which aims to "promote life which is just, equitable, and ecologically sustainable" (Alvarez-Ugena, 1997). There is a clear indication that citizens of this project believe questions of justice and equity are different from those of ecological sustainability. A similar example comes from the water-starved Middle East. In this region prospects for peace are inextricably linked, not only to sustainability of a water supply, but also to questions about population growth, religious tolerance, justice, and equity (Bakir, 1999; Haddad, 1999; Lewinger-Dressler, 1999; Zuzovsky & Yakir, 1999).

The issues discussed in this paper reveal that not

all values can be sustained, that there are deeper and more important philosophical questions than simply talking about sustainability. We need to speak more confidently about assumptions, lifestyles, world-views, and conceptions of human place and purpose in ecosystems. We need to talk about cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic values, and not try to subsume these ideas beneath inadequate labels and limited conceptualisations. And, we must find space to discuss cultural identities, respect, society-nature relationships, tensions between intrinsic and instrumental values and other ideas that lie beyond sustainability.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the day is this just about the splitting of semantic hairs? Am I simply pursuing, as one observer mooted, the "fallacy of immaculate perception" (Zoller, 1999)? Should we just concede that sustainability is close enough and get on with developing educational programs to implement this vision?

In the first place, I have been arguing about something far more fundamental than linguistic nuances. I am not seeking an 'immaculate' or perfect replacement for sustainability or sustainable development. Rather more seriously I am challenging readers to confront their own conceptions of education. Is it educational to prescribe the values, concepts, and normative frameworks that ought to define educational outcomes? I think not. If education is to have a capacity to challenge what has gone before, then it must be free to challenge, and possibly reject, the utility of the ideas so commonly accepted today, including sustainability and sustainable development. With such a conception of education in mind, it does not make sense to replace sustainability with another object of 'educational desire'.

Second, sustainability is an important idea, but one with serious limitations. It is a mistake to think of it as omnibus term, an organising concept, or an aim of education. Education for sustainability, as seductive as the idea is, falls short of environmental education's largely unrealised potential - potential to transcend the present. So, is there a future for sustainability in the next millennium? Cautiously yes, if we return to Jarnet's (1998) questions and decide that 'sustainability' is a stepping stone in the evolution of our thinking and if we recognise the limitations of this term. Much good work has been done by educators in the name of sustainability, work that we can build upon. But, I think that we should expect more from environmental education. The real challenge for growth in the next century is to go where sustainability cannot - to go beyond sustainability.

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