

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROPOSED COUNCIL FOR THE ENVIRONMENT NATIONAL CORE SYLLABUS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Environment Affairs, in cooperation with EEASA, undertook a broad consultative process, a central feature of which was the recent Dikhololo Workshop (see Clacherty in this issue). The process led to the Environmental Education Policy Initiative (EEPI), the purpose of which is to foster broad-based processes to promote policy change with respect to environmental education in formal education. The EEPI is not a unilateral initiative; it seeks to work within existing education policy development and change processes.

During October the Council for the Environment's Committee for Environmental Education ("the Council") released a document titled *The Development of a Core Syllabus for Environmental Education in South Africa* (Council for the Environment 1993). In this document it is claimed that:

This document was produced after preliminary consultations ... at a national conference convened under the auspices of the Department of Environment Affairs and the Environmental Educator's Association of South Africa [sic] at the Dikhololo Conference Centre ... (p.4).

The EEPI developed a response to the Council addressing issues of process, for it was strongly felt that the Council had neglected the basic principles of consultation and inclusivity and had then attempted to gain credibility by means of the reference to the Dikhololo process, which enjoys wide support and credibility (see Clacherty, this issue). A formal response reflecting these concerns has been sent to the Council.

At the same time as the EEPI response was being compiled, a number of other environmental educators also decided to voice their concern about the Council's document. In his response, Dr Danie Schreuder addresses issues relating to the process

and content, as well as language. [Schreuder's response also features in this issue of the *Journal*. His comments on translation are best understood when read in the language in which they were written, and they are published in Afrikaans. Ed.]

A second group of concerned EEASA members (the authors of this critique) also examined the Council's document in terms of process, underlying orientations and substance. This particular response is covered here. It was written in the hope of stimulating debate and opening up the issue, with the purpose of bringing features of environmental education into sharper focus. The authors hope that the Council and other readers will respond to the issues that they raise and that this might illuminate approaches to environmental education that are most likely to be useful in South Africa.

BACKGROUND TO THE CRITIQUE

The initial response to the document was a 'what is this' when it arrived and an immediate sense of 'it looks good' or 'at last we have something more coherent to work with'. The document's claim to have emerged from consultation at Dikhololo triggered a sense of unease, but it was felt that the contents were still a coherent and useful whole. This illusion slowly dissipated as we engaged with the text.

Deficiencies in the process by which the document had been produced, worrying underpinning orientations and inconsistencies in its substance led us to question where this document was taking environmental education. We were soon left with the feeling that the entire project needed to be clarified and openly debated amongst environmental educators in southern Africa. Hence this review.

Participants who examined the core syllabus experienced successive insights as we helped each other to clarify the document and its implications.

We found that it was helpful to avoid setting up one approach against another, but to look for coherence within the document and the context in which it is to be applied. The critical thing here is that incoherent frameworks are unlikely to contribute to relevant environmental education. Also, from the outset, the way we go about developing courses needs to be consistent with the way we see environmental education. This is why we need to encourage an open contestation to clarify the process, orientations and substance of a national syllabus for environmental education. A critical process of change within modern society challenges us to do precisely this.

The review is intended to address issues of:

- * process
- * orientation
- * substance

For the purposes of this critique the term 'process' refers to the manner in which the curriculum document was developed; 'orientations' refers to its theoretical, philosophical and ideological underpinnings; and substance is defined as the overall coherence of the document's contents in terms of the curriculum model it adopts and the directions in environmental education to which it points.

WHAT IS IT?

The document is presented as a core syllabus that is in the process of being developed (see title), and (on the inside cover) as a tool-kit to develop courses. It is structured to present three national components for a curriculum development process (UNICEF 1988:8). It is seen as a working document and has been circulated to all heads of department of tertiary institutions for development into

a national resource document for the development of local environmental syllabuses and programmes (p.4).

On the face of it, and ignoring for the moment the sensitivities in this country around issues of unilateral restructuring, this is a coherent position and a worthwhile quest.

FROM WHOM HAS IT COME?

The Council for the Environment is an advisory body to the Minister for the Environment. One of its key roles is to advise the Minister on policy to

be enacted through the Department of Environment Affairs and other appropriate government departments.

As already mentioned, the Department of Environment Affairs, in cooperation with EEASA, undertook a broad consultative process which culminated in the recent Dikhololo Workshop and the launch of the EEPI, intended to foster broad-based processes to construct environmental education policy. The core syllabus document claims that after having been drafted and circulated earlier (April 1993) it was produced following "preliminary consultation" at Dikhololo (p.4).

It is here that the first tensions start to emerge, for it brings into question the process within which the document has been produced.

THE PROCESS

Our chief concern about the way the Council document came about lies in the fact that in the education community in South Africa, the focus of conflict has been attempts on the part of the existing education authorities, primarily the Department of National Education (DNE), to develop and put in place new education policy in isolation of the wider process of policy development. This has been seen as attempts at 'unilateral restructuring' and at entrenching certain views and structures ahead of national negotiations in education.

It is noteworthy that the DNE has undertaken to desist from these unilateral activities and rather to locate such work within the ambit of the National Education and Training Forum (NETF). We note with concern that the Council for the Environment has not thought it necessary to take a similar step.

Further, there is a fundamental inconsistency in the fact that the document lays claim to having been constructed after consultation at Dikhololo, while, in fact, it was released outside of the EEPI in an attempt to position itself as a national resource for the development of syllabi and programmes. A document that is used at a national level for this purpose is clearly a policy. One must thus question the intent of the Council. Its members endorsed the EEPI, and the Council then appears to have rush-released its own and apparently competing policy initiative. In these circumstances it is difficult for us to understand the call for the document to be:

considered, edited, added to, amplified and

extended to accommodate all desired emphases, to become a national resource document for the development of local environmental education syllabuses and programmes (p.4).

Clearly, the Council should clarify its apparently dual agenda and its participation in the EEPI initiative with the Department of Environment Affairs. The Council and the Department share the same address so they should, more easily than some other groups, be able to work together on the clarification and support of environmental education.

The analysis further revealed problematic underlying assumptions in the document, as well as issues of content. These will be discussed next.

WORRYING ORIENTATIONS AND CONTENT

Background

It is no longer contested that our education system is in an appalling state. It is a system developed by the governors of our country during the apartheid era, the consequences of which also feature environmental degradation. This was a time when educational practice was underpinned by a fundamental pedagogy applied in a systematic and functional manner. Educational policy was behaviourist in outlook, structural-functionalist in practice and positivist in the extreme. Any country with such a system of education will suffer the consequences and today we are not only suffering from the abuse of our land, but also from social and political violence of tragic proportions. Sadly the Council document does little to explore for itself a new set of assumptions.

Ideological Underpinnings

This brief back-drop to an exploration of the underlying orientations of the Council's policy document is necessary because the document is steeped, albeit unwittingly, in the very ideology that has led to the present crisis (Beck, 1992). Ironically, much of the pioneering work in environmental education in South Africa has been successfully grappling with, and overturning, the assumptions underlying this ideology. It is gravely unfortunate, therefore, that this document takes such a stance. For example:

"... sound environmental values." (p. 5)

Whose values and for whom?

"... leading to positive behaviours."

"... behaviour patterns ... appropriate environmental behaviours ... values and skills." (p.6)

These words reflect the underlying ideology that is so prevalent throughout the document. This is an ideology (technicism) and an orientation (behaviourism) that has been discredited throughout the world for treating people like machines to be processed by an outside authority. Is this really what we want for environmental education?

Closer to home, a careful analysis of the text reveals a worrying association of ideas in the document with those of Christian National Education and its cornerstone education philosophy known, until recently, as fundamental pedagogics. It is not possible in the scope of this review to go into great detail - in an analysis of a policy initiative in history education, Kallaway (1991) uses 42 single-spaced pages to deal with this topic. A central point made there is that while much has changed in terms of the terminology used by state aligned curriculum reform groups, in fact, little has changed:

The central weakness of the reports ... lies in their refusal to place their investigations or their recommendations in historical context - to acknowledge the linkages between their recommendations and the legacy of apartheid education and the Afrikaner nationalist historiography in schools. Indeed, the reports ... display an alarming propensity to reproduce apartheid education in new clothes (Kallaway 1991:30).

The difficulty with applying the above assertion to the Council document is that the linkages are not explicit, or even intended. Yet one must ask why the haste in publishing this document - is it to establish a policy position in advance of what might emerge from the democratic process?

There is also the position taken on culture and community in the document. Phrases such as "To promote an awareness of other cultural positions" (p.13) leave little doubt as to the orientation adopted. In concluding this short section, we endorse the view that:

The argument for the preservation of communal, cultural and social rights for cultural groupings/ minorities in a democratic and post-apartheid South African context needs to be challenged (Kallaway 1991:30).

Eclectic style

Another disturbing feature of the document is its blatant eclecticism. Here is an outlook that, in seeking to accommodate all-comers, achieves less than the sum of its parts. This assertion may sound strange, but the key to understanding it is that the 'parts' are often either contradictory or incompatible, yet they are put together **uncritically** and without making explicit their internal and external associations. This has placed the document in danger of relegating itself to "...the degree zero of contemporary culture" (Lyotard 1993:42).

Reductionist Structure

The idea that people comprise, in their make-up, "knowledge, values and skills culminating in appropriate environmental behaviours ..." (p.6) is the epitome of a reductionist outlook on learning that reduces the person to a cognitive object ready for "social regulation" (Popkewitz 1991). Is it not clear that the notion of dividing the individual up into attitudes, values and actions for expediency in education runs contrary to the very principles of holism and humanity? The dividing up of our minds and actions is like a mental apartheid that is contrary to the respect our fellow learners deserve.

Topics

From pages 15 to 20 a number of topics for environmental education are listed. These have relevance in environmental education and could provide planners with good, common sense, topics to work from. However, even here a tendency towards limited perspectives on major issues is apparent.

For example, the topic human ecology (section 2.3.1) contains reference to family planning, which is linked to birth control. Nowhere is there reference to social development and welfare issues, which are in fact stronger determinants of human population growth than birth control. The next section (2.4), dealing with limits to natural resources, links the concept of population numbers to famine. While this is a valid connection to make, there is the implied value position: If you have too many children, you suffer famine. There must surely be other perspectives on this issue? Another legitimate topic is that of slum development (2.7.2), but are there not other ways of describing this? It is worth noting that this topic is grouped with Sound (noise levels), Advertising

on hoardings and Impact on health and nature under the heading "Urban". Under section 2.7.3 the topic of soil losses is dealt with. Of the many possible categories that this topic could have been grouped with, the title selected in the document, namely "Wastage", in ignoring all other possible factors associated with soil losses, reveals a distressing lack of sensitivity to the realities of life in many parts of this country.

There are many other examples which, by the choice of words or the association of concepts, reveals an uncritical and limited perspective on many very serious issues. A few more examples are quoted directly, without comment, apart from *italics*:

- 4.2 Poverty
 - 4.2.1 Slum development and spread
 - 4.2.2 Break up of traditional structures
 - 4.2.3 Chemical abuse
(No further sub-sections listed.)
- 4.3.3 Social and labour *unrest*
- 5.2.6 Infanticide (abortion)

The underlying orientations highlighted above are worrying in themselves. Furthermore, they brought into question the very substance of the document.

COHERENCE OF THE SUBSTANCE

The structure of the document suggests a coherent line of education. When one however examines the position taken and the unfolding line of argument in the text, there is little sign of such coherence.

The critique of the document's substance examines the curriculum model adopted, and maps out how this model interacts with the proposed framing features (objectives, scope and method) for the design of an environmental education course. The proposed syllabus is located within an international approach to curriculum development (UNICEF 1988) for which the objectives, scope and methods are developed at a national level and all of the other steps are determined locally (p.8).

The remainder of the document is then devoted to articulating the objectives, scope and methods of environmental education for South Africa so that planners and heads of department can develop tertiary courses. The principles for framing these

are first outlined (p.9). A clear distinction is then drawn between the implementation of a "conventional" approach which teaches "about" the environment, and a more balanced, broader focused and values-rich approach centered on teaching "for" the environment. Life, resources, life-skills and personal values frame the objectives that are proposed as a check-list for assessing existing courses and for designing new ones (p.11). To achieve these objectives six groupings of organising concepts (Content) are recommended: Personal development; Natural systems; Development; Peace and conflict; Human rights; Futures. This is followed by eight method categories (discovery, adventure, communication, understanding, creativity, sensory, fantasy and values commitment) which are organised within four developmental stages (Maturity, Adolescence, Late childhood and Early childhood).

The 'part top-down' approach, the derivation of these objectives and the construction of the organising concepts do not resonate with a coherent epistemological framework, trends in curriculum development or theories of teaching and learning. For the purpose of this review, however, it is not proposed to explore these issues but to examine where all of this takes us in the text of the document.

The narrative proposes that, designed within this syllabus framework,

... a course will not only pursue the elements of knowledge that are mutual to a single host discipline plus environmental education, but extend itself across the whole domain of the man-environment interface (p.21).

To disembed knowledge from its social context, to juxtapose environmental education against the notion of a host discipline and then to spread this across an objectification of an historical process, is patently absurd.

The text continues:

Expressive disciplines will be needed along with communicative and cultural disciplines to convey and embody the affective elements developing as values responses to local environmental issues (p.21)

This statement too makes no sense at all. How

could one have an expressive discipline that was separated from communication which in turn was culturally distinct? Even if one treats these apparently interacting parts as an holistic world view it would surely be inconsistent to enact them in elemental and behaviourist terms?

These are not cases of semantic fuzziness which can be clarified by editing the document. They derive from an incoherence within the substance of the document. These problems come into sharper focus in the concluding tables. Here one finds the decontextualisation and separation of discovery, adventure, communication, understanding, creativity, sensory, fantasy and valuing commitment as "methods", which are as such not operable within existing conventions of teaching and learning.

The final regrouping of these into categories of method that are located within developmental stages with their own unfolding clusters creates the illusion of some grand plan and deep logic. This is soon dispelled by common sense questions like:

Do young children not act on their values?
Do young children not "curiously question" and solve problems?
Is aesthetic citizen action not possible through story-telling about global concepts by young children?

The last comments are a play on this absurd view of environmental education as based on developmental stages, methodological maps and the application of artificially grouped processes as strategies to bring about changes in values and behaviour, and the day-to-day reality of humans.

CONCLUSION

The core syllabus which initially held such a compelling sense of usefulness is, to say the least, unhelpful. It amounts to little more than a superficial rhetoric that is internally inconsistent and serves more to cloud and to confuse than to illuminate environmental education. This syllabus document clearly needs to be radically reconceptualised, both as a process and in terms of its substance, if the Council is to contribute to the development of environmental education programmes in South Africa.

This review has been written so as to alert the Council to some of the possible consequences of circulating and promoting this booklet. We would

like to believe that the Council's document was prepared and marketed with the best intentions for the future of environmental education in South Africa. That the document has dangerous ambiguities is probably owing, ironically, to the lack of cooperation in its development, coupled with a desire to satisfy all-comers and to influence education practice in the heat of current events. This does no justice to environmental education as a significant endeavour for education change in South Africa. The fact that a wider group of expertise needs to work together on projects of this nature is obvious, especially in the light of the wide range of opinion that is apparent, and reflected in this document. We hope that through this effort to debate the issues we will all learn a great deal.

NOTE

The authors do not claim to represent EEASA's views, although they have consulted very widely during the compilation of the response and are submitting it to the *Journal* in association with, among others, Prof Pat Irwin, Eureka Janse van Rensburg and Glynnis Clacherty.

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