



Perspectives on the Eco-Schools Programme: An environment/education dialogue

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Introduction

The viewpoints shared in this paper started with a brief discussion between Kim Ward, national Eco-Schools co-ordinator (South Africa) and Karsten Schnack from the Danish University of Education during his visit to South Africa in August 2003. Because it was a short visit, Ward was not able to do much more than briefly describe how the Eco-Schools programme had started in South Africa and what was happening during its pilot year (2003).

Schnack returned home to Copenhagen, thought about what Ward had shared with him and also about his experience of Eco-Schools and how it runs in European countries. He sent a short thought-provoking email as an attempt to articulate some of the ambivalence he felt towards such school programmes. Ward replied and circulated the email to several colleagues working with Eco-Schools in South Africa. A lively email discussion ensued.

Following a brief introduction and background to the Eco-Schools programme in South Africa, extracts from the email conversations which took place between August and September 2003 following Schnack's visit to South Africa are included, interspersed with further reflection and reading. We hope that sharing the discussion might provide a useful starting point for a discussion with teachers and others who are thinking of participating in the Eco-Schools initiative.

What is the Eco-Schools Programme?

When schools register as Eco-Schools they commit themselves to an ongoing process of actively developing lesson plans with an environmental focus and improving the school environment. Eco-Schools develop school environmental policies and choose at least three focus areas from these policies, recording their progress in a portfolio. Portfolios are assessed and successful schools gain Eco-School status and are awarded with a flag.

Eco-Schools in South Africa

Eco-Schools is an international programme of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). In South Africa the programme is being developed and managed by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, a member of FEE, in a cooperative relationship with the Department of Education.

There are currently 90 pilot schools registered with the South African Eco-Schools programme. These schools aim to submit their portfolios with evidence of work done in schools by the end of October and, if successful, will be awarded with Eco-School status in November each year. Schools may keep their flags for a year, by the end of which a new portfolio must be submitted to show evidence of ongoing work. A growing number of schools are beginning to register for the ongoing Eco-Schools programme.

It can be noted in the email conversations which follow that one of Schnack's key concerns is with the educational aims of school programmes rather than instrumental or environmental goals. In an earlier paper (Le Roux, 1997), Ward also drew attention to the importance of the second E in 'EE' (environmental education). In our concern for environmental issues, the educational component of environmental education is frequently ignored (Wade, 1996; Jickling, 1997; Robotom, 1987). This paper also highlights the importance of open and engaged conversation (and the email discussion which follows is a good example of this) in developing better environmental education processes (and programmes). We turn now to Schnack's first email and the start of our Eco-School conversation.

Schnack (20 August 2003):

I am looking forward to hear more about 'your' Eco-Schools. As I told you, I have an ambivalent feeling about the whole model, as on the one hand simply it is a good idea and on the other hand so easily becomes a means-end thinking: using the schools to solve environmental problems rather than to educate people. Therefore, one of the most important things to work with will be to insist on educational (and not only environmental and instrumental) aims and goals – especially why the whole idea about a flag and an award brings a dimension of competition into the project.

Ward (later, 20 August 2003):

I agree strongly with the educational importance and focus that should be foregrounded in Eco-Schools. We are stressing the curriculum aspect and that the starting point needs to be lesson plans for each of an Eco-School's focus areas. The emphasis is definitely on learners and not labourers!

The Eco-Schools initiative in South Africa differs significantly from the programmes run in Europe and has been re-oriented to focus on strengthening curriculum and supporting its implementation (away from a starting point with and a concern for environmental projects and activities in schools). The route that is developing is therefore from curriculum outcomes that might result in activities that enhance school environments and sustainability.

Regarding the flag and award dimension, this should not be the most important part of Eco-Schools, but it is wonderful to be able to offer schools an opportunity for recognition for efforts. This seems to be very meaningful to many teachers and learners, especially those who struggle sometimes seemingly anonymously in isolated school situations. There is no winner in the Eco-Schools programme; rather Eco-Schools can be seen as an ongoing status for a school.

Ally Ashwell, a freelance environmental educator who supports schools in the Cape Town area with resource material development and school environmental policy processes, also had something to say about the flag.

Ashwell (21 August 2003):

I would also have recoiled from the idea of flags and other bits of bunting some time ago before seeing how much schools appreciate being recognised for their efforts. I agree with you that the keen teachers are so often 'lone voices' who really need to know that someone out there is noticing and appreciating the extra miles they are going.

We will see as we go along what the best forms of recognition may be, but I do agree with you that it is important to recognise and celebrate the efforts of schools – often against huge odds. I think the way South African Eco-Schools has been conceptualised gives adequate attention to the disparities between schools and therefore does not use competition as a means to exclude schools unfairly. But just as Outcomes Based Education states that different learners may take different lengths of time to achieve outcomes, so it may take some aspirant Eco-Schools longer than others to transform aspects of their environment. If schools have not yet achieved their goals, I don't think anyone would expect them to be recognised for having done so. While we want to move away from the negative aspects of competition, I fear that failing to recognise excellence will encourage complacency and mediocrity – not attitudes that will help to make us 'proudly South African'.

Ashwell also thinks that while we are 'very conscious of environmental learning, especially in the curriculum context' we should also be encouraging environmental action at schools.

I have been so embedded in the 'educational' aspects of environmental education that I sometimes feel that I am not encouraging enough 'environmental action', particularly in some aspects of the life of the school, e.g. community involvement and the role of non-teaching staff. I also find that there are some areas of environmental care that are not currently supported by the main environmental organisations and therefore often overlooked (I think, for example, of the consumer choices schools make and the hazardous materials they have in stock). Similarly some colleagues challenge us that we are not actually doing much to develop skills of environmental activism at schools, as we are so focused on responding to the predetermined outcomes of the curriculum.

Helen Springall Bach, chief technical advisor for a regional environmental education support programme, wanted to explore this further.

Springall Bach (28 August):

For the sake of clarity, ARE we educating for environmental activism? I would dispute that environmental education is for activism. I like to think more of education for environmental literacy (a la David Orr, perhaps) – an environmentally literate citizen is someone who can understand, decide and take action, where appropriate. An

environmental activist is something different, I think, although activists can and should also be environmentally literate citizens!

In terms of consumer choices that schools make, apart from hazardous chemicals, I think that the the 'food miles' concept (calculating how far the food we eat travels from where it is produced) might be helpful in exploring issues of local/global trade, transport costs, etc. in relation to initiatives like school gardens.

Here Springall Bach gives an example of how the focus can be taken back to learning from which will emerge appropriate choices and actions (rather than starting with action/activism). Rob O'Donoghue, a professor at the Rhodes University Environmental Education Unit, also articulates this point in his contribution to the discussion.

O'Donoghue (27 August):

The words we construct and often 'oppose' our thinking with can be very important. Notable is the idea of environmental education as involving knowledge, values, attitudes and actions (behaviour). We are currently looking at learning actions through which there is change in attitude, ways of knowing and value orientations. This effectively turns things around somewhat so that actions are not outcomes but learning processes of cultural reorientation. It takes some thinking about but when one gets it, then the focus on curriculum and learning begs the question 'how' rather than 'what and does it lead to action?'

Reflecting on all these contributions and drawing on previous work on the concept of action competence' Schnack added the following...

Schnack (9 September):

In my view all institutions in society ought to be as environmentally friendly as possible with respect to energy, water, consumption, etc. This applies to schools too, of course. In this way you might have an idea of – and even a diploma for – 'eco-institutions'. Green schools or Eco-Schools may be defined in this way, and that is OK for me.

On the other hand, schools are institutions of a certain kind, different from most other institutions. Socio-economically they have several functions, for example, discipline and develop a workforce, separate the smart kids from the less skilled ones, etc. All these functions are very important and we need to understand them in their historically dynamic development. However, for our discussion the most interesting trait of the school is not a function but the educational aim. Schools are aiming at education. In this perspective the learning processes are the most important, and green schools or Eco-Schools may be defined by their efforts to develop environmental consciousness and action competence related to democracy and environmental sustainability.

So, we have two different kinds of criteria: looked upon as institutions schools may be rewarded for saving energy or water, etc; looked upon as schools they may be rewarded for their educational efforts. And there need not to be any simple links between the two.

As it is much easier to draw up specific criteria for – and therefore to measure – the objective environmental effects than the subjective educational learning outcomes, at least in Europe it is not uncommon to give a green flag or something according to the first criteria. Again, this may be all right as long as you remember that it is only the school as an institution you are giving a reward.

When it comes to the educational aims and the learning processes, we all know that the crucial point is if the children are actively involved, participating, developing ownership and so on. In the action competence approach it is also a decisive criterion that the pupils are taken seriously and invited to make up their minds themselves instead of being treated moralistically. So again, the most important thing is not what the pupils learn, but what they learn from learning what they learn.

You probably cannot develop action competence without gaining experience from taking action. And this kind of experiential knowledge is probably more important than most of the traditionally evaluated curricular knowledge. So, environmental activism will often be an important part of the teaching/learning process in a good Eco-School – though the educational quality should be measured not on the environmental outcome itself, but on the level of qualified participation, critical reflection and learning. Sometimes you may learn a lot from unsuccessful actions, and sometimes you need results to stay committed and not become too frustrated and apathetic. Reflections on these very complicated pedagogical dialectics will be an integrated part of the teachers' professional work.

Ward – Final comment (October 2003):

Should Eco-Schools be assessed on their pedagogical and educational efforts more than their environmental effects (even if these may be ingredients in the pedagogical processes)?

We hope that our voices and viewpoints have opened up spaces for your own viewpoints. If you would like to add your voice to the conversation, email Ward at kim@futurenet.co.za or Schnack at schnack@dpu.dk.

Notes on the Contributors

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Karsten Schnack is a Professor of Education in the Danish University of Education in Denmark. He is well known internationally for his pioneering research on action competence in environmental and health education. He leads a research group focussing on this concept. Email: schnack@dpu.dk.

Endnote

1. Schnack (1995a; 1995b; 1996) and Jensen and Schnack (1997) stress that in an action competence approach actions must be judged in relation to their educational value. It is not the task of the school to improve the world by means of children's activities. They explain that the pre-occupation with action competence as an educational concept is based on 'a scepticism about the educational paradigm in environmental education which manifests itself partly in a marked tendency to individualisation and partly in a tendency to regard the educational task as a question of behaviour modification' (p.163). Action competence does not necessarily mean action in schools. The concept of action competence includes the capacity to be able to act, now and in the future, and to be responsible for one's actions (Jensen & Schnack, 1997).

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