Viewpoint
Speaking of Sustainable Development and Values...
A Response to Alistair Chadwick's Viewpoint Responding to Destructive Interpersonal Interactions: A way forward for school–based environmental educators

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Abstract

It may be considered unfair to respond to a paper from the point of view of another discipline, especially if central issues or assumptions in that article are discussed critically. In this paper, comments are made on Alistair Chadwick's paper from the point of view of philosophy and ethics, but these are offered in the spirit of a constructive dialogue across narrowly conceived disciplinary borders. The general theme of these comments also calls for interdisciplinary dialogue: the language *that we use in our debates about environmental education, ethics and action. As such, language is a theme about which every discipline in the social sciences can make a meaningful contribution, and this is what I would like to offer here.*

In this Viewpoint I will focus on only one issue, namely certain problems that may arise if we accept the language in which Chadwick speaks in his paper about 'sustainable development' and 'values' respectively. I will raise a number of critical points in this regard, not because there is one and only one appropriate language within which we can discuss our environmental concerns and our (educational) responses to them, but rather because we should be self-consciously aware of the assumptions and implications hidden in the language that we choose to discuss these matters, thus enabling us to disect and evaluate these assumptions and implications with a view to determine to what extent they enhance or undermine our efforts to understand the nature and extent of the environmental challenges that we are faced with.

Speaking of Sustainable Development

In the earlier parts of his paper, Chadwick refers to a 'sustainable lifestyle' and to 'sustainable development' as two important goals that should be set for (environmental) education, and that this should be achieved by 'whole–school structures, procedures and processes' that respond to 'destructive interpersonal relationships' and at the same time 'will foster constructive interpersonal relationships'. I think that Chadwick is right when he states that constructive interpersonal relationships are prerequisites for a sustainable lifestyle and for sustainable development in general. This is not in dispute, and also not his observation that destructive interpersonal relationships such as child abuse and neglect, emotional abuse, physical violence, prejudice and discrimination, and a general disregard for the rights of others, will prevent learners from effectively engaging with the problems of an unhealthy bio–physical environment that includes water and air pollution, the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion and poor waste management.

What is in dispute, however, is the manner in which Chadwick distinguishes and separates from one another two, maybe even three different 'environments' when he speaks of a safe and healthy environment that needs to be sustained, and then does not really succeed in putting them back together again – in the sense of showing convincingly how they interact and bear upon one another.

When Chadwick speaks about a healthy and safe environment, he sometimes refers to the *bio-physical environment* and natural resources, and sometimes to the *social environment*, including in this culture and social history as well as destructive interpersonal relationships, but he mostly speaks of a healthy and safe *classroom environment* in the sense of an educational context (whole-school structures, procedures and processes) in which learners can feel safe to express difficult emotions and develop constructive interpersonal relationships.

Chadwick furthermore seems to argue for a recognition in environmental education of a set of problems that are related to the *local environment* and makes it 'especially unhealthy and unsafe'. These problems are those that he classifies as destructive interpersonal relationships, and he argues that these should be recognised 'beyond' problems such as pollution and poor waste management that result in an unhealthy bio-physical environment.

If I read Chadwick's suggestions in this regard correctly, his argument is at one level a plea to link environmental problems in the sense of bio-physical problems to that of social problems in the sense of destructive interpersonal relationships, and again with this I have no issue. The trouble, however, starts if this *link* is portrayed to mean that social problems, because of their immediacy, should be foregrounded as that with which we should deal first, while bio-physical problems should be moved to the background to be dealt with later after we have paid attention to more urgent matters.

If this is indeed what Chadwick argues for in his paper, his viewpoint resonates strongly with the very widespread and dominant model of sustainable development that is found today in about every policy document on the environment that one can lay one's hands on, ranging from our National Environmental Management Act (107 of 1998) to the Johannesburg Declaration of September 2002 on sustainable development and its attendant Implementation Plan. According to this model, sustainable development entails an effort to 'integrate' what is often referred to as the three pillars or components of sustainable development, i.e. the economic, social–political and environmental spheres (see Figure 1).

It is important to note there seems to be a remarkable consensus in the world today in the graphic portrayal of this dominant notion of sustainable development. In most, if not all cases, the classic representation of this is found in the image of three overlapping circles where each circle respectively represents the sphere of the economy, the social-political and the environment. This Venn diagram of sustainable development is usually represented in the following way:

Figure 1. The classic representation of sustainable development

Economic sphere

Socio-political sphere
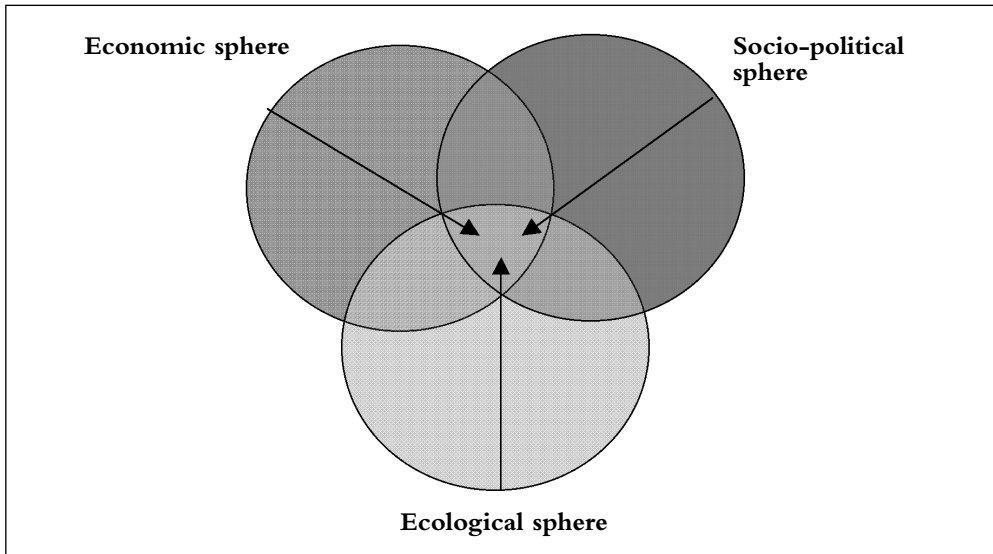
Ecological sphere

While this image can be criticised for being incomplete, leaving out the spheres of technology and governance (alternative visualisations of sustainable development in which the technological and governance dimensions are incorporated), it still works with the image of three pillars that need to be integrated with one another – supported as they are by a foundation that consists of technology on the one hand, and governance on the other hand (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Another classic representation of sustainable development: the three pillars model

Environment

Socio-political

Economy

Technology
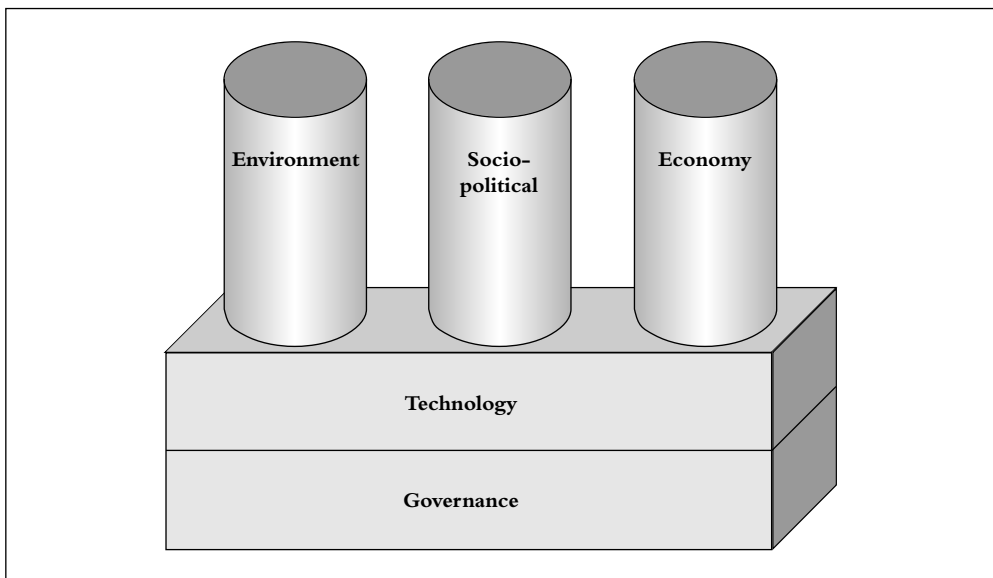
Governance

Within the sphere of corporate decision-making and governance, the same model of three pillars is found in the notion of triple bottom-line accounting, auditing and reporting (Elkington, 1998). In the corporate world, this entails taking into account considerations related to financial, social and environmental factors. In terms of this, a management decision is acceptable if it makes sense in terms of all three 'bottom lines': financial, social, and environmental.

Probing this image a little further and asking what the 'integration' of these three pillars or spheres may entail, the common language that seems to dominate is either that of finding the right balance between the three spheres, or finding the optimal trade-off between them. This clearly begs the question of who determines what the right balance or the optimal trade-off between the three pillars/spheres of sustainable development is, how they go about determining this, and on the basis of which assumptions and considerations.

While acknowledging that these images of sustainable development are very useful to catch the imagination of a corporate audience (Zadek, 2001:107) and policy makers, and while these images will in all probability continue to express the dominant conceptualisation of sustainable development in the world, it is important to note that exactly this image (or language) of three pillars or spheres is not as innocent and ideologically neutral as it seems to be. These problems include the following:

- The three pillars model of sustainable development creates the impression of three separate spheres, each with its own set of values and working according to its own internal logic. Thus the economic sphere can be seen as aiming towards the creation of material wealth and ensuring growth; the social sphere as aiming towards improving the quality of life of people and ensuring equity between people, communities and nations; while the environmental sphere has to do with protection and conservation of our natural environment (Zadek, 2001:110). A more accurate, but far more complex image would be that of these three spheres being embedded within one other, with interlocking values and a logic inseparably intertwined with one another (see Figure 3).
- The three pillars model of sustainable development strengthens the perception of aspects of economic activity that fall outside of the social sphere and also outside of the environmental sphere, and that there is only some overlap in certain areas. Again the notion of one sphere being embedded in the other wider ones, where the wider spheres constitute holding spaces sustaining narrower spheres, could be a factually more accurate image. Indeed, there is not a single aspect of social life that does not lie wholly within the environmental sphere, that does not have environmental roots and consequences. In the same manner, all economic activity essentially comprises social processes (Zadek, 2001:111).
- The three pillars model says nothing about the manner in which the three pillars interact with or affect one another, or how they are dependent on one another (Zadek, 2001:110).
- In policy and decision-making, the interaction between the different spheres is usually reduced to making trade-offs within and between the different spheres – where costs in one sphere, e.g. the environmental, are offset (i.e. rendered acceptable) by benefits in the economic or social sphere.

- The three pillars model locks us into the language and practice of mitigating inevitable social and environmental costs related to economic and human development.
- The three pillars model assumes that resources are infinitely intersubstitutable, leaving us with no basis to argue for safe minimum standards and non-negotiable social and environmental thresholds.
- The three pillars model is embedded in a version of conventional, instrumental rationality that is not strong enough to resist current exploitation, depletion and destruction of the bio-physical environment. In fact, the three pillars model sits squarely within the paradigm that is causing our environmental problems in the first place.
- The three pillars model supports a weak notion of sustainable development that leaves the world pretty much functioning as it currently does.
- The three pillars model of sustainable development is highly anthropocentric in nature, and does not allow much, if anything, for considering what has become known as the intrinsic value of nature or non-human entities.

This brings us to the question of what an alternative conceptualisation of sustainable development may look like, and how it would overcome the difficulties of the dominant notion sketched above. Amongst scholars in environmental ethics, an alternative notion of sustainable development has been formed in which the image of three separate pillars or spheres referred to above is replaced by the image of three spheres that are embedded within one another. This alternative image would look something like this:

Figure 3. An alternative portrayal of sustainable development in terms of three embedded spheres
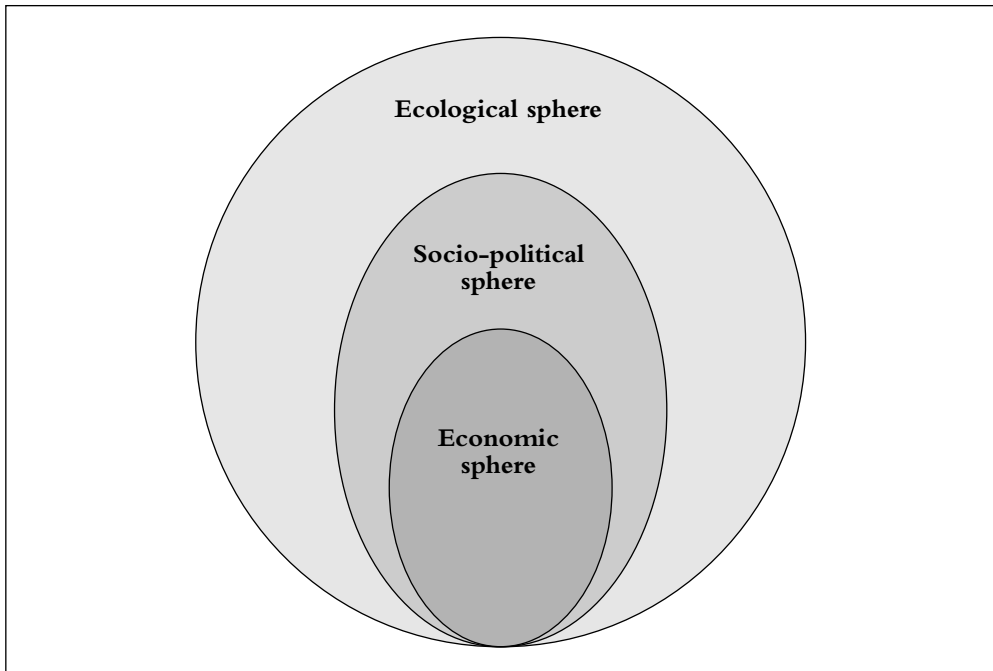
From the point of view of this image, each wider circle serves as a holding space for the sphere embedded within it, making it not only possible, but also sustaining it in the literal sense of the word.

This image further implies that activities in one sphere may have a negative impact, even to the point of disruption or destruction, on the larger sphere. This image then locks us into a language of prevention of impacts, instead of mitigation as in the case of the three pillars image described previously. Language also associated with this image is that of precaution and safe minimum standards, and even of non-negotiable thresholds in the social as well as the environmental sphere – thresholds that we should not even approach as a result of our economic activities.

The most important implication of the image of three embedded spheres, however, is that economic, socio-political and environmental considerations do not each have their own logic and values separate from the other spheres. Rather they are intertwined from the outset – to such an extent that a fundamental rethink is required of everything that we up until now have conceptualised as economic activity, socio-political engagement and the environment. On the question as to how such a rethink should take place, along which lines and from which assumptions, however, there is sadly still little if any consensus available in the sphere of theoretical environmental ethics, or in the spheres of environmental activism. In this regard, the scene is rather dominated by lots of experimentation and intense in-fighting between different positions.

Having said this, and now returning to Chadwick's paper, it is clear to me that his language about sustainable development reinforces the dominant, conventional model sketched above in terms of three spheres or pillars. But not only this, as I read his argument, it seems as if he adds an ideological spin to the dominant image of sustainable development. This ideology consists of privileging one of the so-called three spheres of sustainable development as if it is more important or more urgent than all the others. Thus an economistic ideology can exist in which economic considerations are deemed to be the only lens through which sustainable development should be conceptualised. Similarly, a environmentalist ideology can emerge if sustainable development is portrayed to be only about conservation of the bio-physical environment, as if people and the economy didn't matter.

If I read Chadwick's plea for a greater emphasis in environmental education on social issues correctly, he seems to level a legitimate critique of environmental education if, and in so far as it displays a bias towards addressing bio-physical issues in isolation from social issues. However, Chadwick, to my mind, trades in one ideology for another by turning social issues into the primary and sole objects of our concern – issues that we have to separate from other problems, and then attend to them first before we move on to what have been relegated to the background.

This, I believe, does not advance our understanding of environmental education, or education in general, for that matter, because it creates the impression that social issues and the feelings that they generate, can be dealt with separately from the economic and bio-physical conditions within which they are embedded.

As I see it, part of the task of education in general, and thus of environmental education in particular, is to acknowledge, foreground, explore and discuss the intricate ways in which social

issues and the difficult feelings that they create, are embedded at a specific time and a particular place, not only in concrete cultural, political and social structures, but also in wider environmental, bio-physical contexts. To think through the links and relationships between all of these structures and contexts, I believe, is the proper task of environmental education, environmental ethics and environmental philosophy.

This point can be underlined, I believe, if we briefly turn to a few critical comments about the language used by Chadwick in his paper when he speaks of values.

Speaking of Values

In the later parts of his paper, just before the conclusion, Chadwick refers to the 'useful framework' that the values outlined within the South African Constitution can provide to ensure the constructive expression of emotions and the maintenance of caring relationships. This framework, he argues, can provide a 'values climate' that would support and nurture constructive intra- and interpersonal relationships in every classroom across the curriculum on an ongoing basis.

I have no problem with the fact that Chadwick draws attention to the importance of values in education, or the values that he lists in this regard, for example: democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, an open society, accountability, the rule of law, respect and reconciliation, etc. The issue that I have, though, is that his language portrays the image of values as abstract entities that somehow hover over and above the things we do and the contexts within which we act, and that these values can guide our actions like stars can give us direction if we have to navigate over a landscape at night.

Chadwick refers to the Constitution as a possible source of values, and I concede that he is correct in this regard, but at the same time I would like to argue that a legal instrument such as a Constitution can be experienced by learners and teachers alike as an external framework that is brought from the outside to a context of learning or decision-making or action, containing a number of ready-made values that at best are 'applied' or at worst imposed on that context.

An alternative way of speaking about values, I would like to suggest, could be to refer to them as those reasons that we quote to justify our choices and actions (Hattingh, 2004:53). We have words and phrases like 'compassion', 'tolerance', 'trust', 'empathy' and 'peace' to summarise these reasons, but I do not think that these reasons exist like abstract entities besides the acts of valuing in which we determine what exactly it is that we find important.

Within the context of education, I believe, this alternative way of speaking about values can help us to acknowledge that an important part of learning consists of uncovering, discussing and assessing the ways in which we value things. From this point of view, the act of valuing, and the many different sources (besides the Constitution) on which we draw to determine or justify what we find valuable, move to centre stage, as well as the contextual forces that shape our valuations, such as vested interests, ideals, dreams, frustrations, ideologies, history, recent experiences, myths, legends and many more.

As such, every act of valuing is part of a particular context that is embedded in wider contexts, and I would like to believe that valuing can be much more than merely a response to

a set of stimuli. In the act of valuing, the valuer takes a stand with regards to what is valued, and as such enters into a relationship that can take many forms, including that of affirmation or rejection.

This perspective, I believe, is important for education in general and environmental education in particular in so far as it prompts us to foreground the manner in which we determine what is of value in a specific situation and why we say so. What is important from this point of view is not so much 'what our values are', but rather 'how do we value?'. If this shift can take place in our educational practice, I believe, the debate is moved forward, perhaps beyond merely acknowledging and expressing feelings. In fact, I would like to contend with Heidegger that feelings entail a form of valuing; in our feelings we affectively register how we are situated in our world; in the 'colour' of our feelings, we become aware of the manner in which we relate to all the institutions and structures within which we live our lives: the family, the school, the community, society at large, our culture, our history, the bio-physical environment, the biosphere of which we are also part of.

I am not sure if Chadwick had this link between feelings, values and the bio-physical environment in mind when he suggested that environmental education starts with acknowledging, discussing, dealing and learning from the emotions that we experience. Focussing on the acts of valuing and how they are embedded in all the structures and 'circles' that sustain our lives, I believe, can help us to again link who we are and how we feel about things to the concrete and multilayered set of relationships that constitute our environment in the broadest sense of the word.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have drawn attention to the language that Chadwick has used when he spoke about sustainable development and values in his article. I have pointed out that his language resonates strongly with dominant notions of sustainable development and values, and that these dominant notions have a number of problems associated with them. I have also tried to show where one could start to look to overcome these problems, acknowledging that much still has to be done in this regard. The main thrust of my paper was to highlight that the language we use to articulate our environmental concerns and our responses to them is neither innocent nor neutral, but carries with it certain assumptions and implications that we need to foreground and critically scrutinise – at least if we want to do a good job in education, environmental education, environmental ethics or environmental action.

Notes on the Contributor

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