

Why I Don't Want My Children To Be Educated for Sustainable Development

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There is considerable debate about the merits of sustainable development and the actions it requires; it is a contested concept (e.g., Huckle, 1991; Disinger, 1990). As we enter the 1990s, this term has become, for many, a vague slogan susceptible to manipulation. For some, it is logically inconsistent. For others, there are concerns that efforts to implement sustainable development will obscure understanding of the economic, political, philosophical, and epistemological roots of environmental issues and adequate examinations of social alternatives. This raises questions about the idea that anyone should educate for such a thing in the first place. With this in mind, I wish to examine two concerns.

The first concern arises from my observations of the "research seminar" held during the North American Association for Environmental

Education's (NAAEE's) 1990 conference in San Antonio. Amid discussions about quantitative, qualitative, and action research, talk about philosophical analysis was conspicuous by its absence. The lack of attention to educational philosophy, and the research methods employed by philosophers, has been an impediment to the development of environmental education. This is a matter of considerable importance. The second concern relates to the proposed relationship between education and sustainable development, particularly as it is described in the term *education for sustainable development*. I will argue that this locution epitomizes a conceptual muddle amidst which environmental educators find themselves.

These two concerns are, of course, related. It is precisely the lack of attention to philosophical analysis of the concepts central to environmental education that allowed the expression and proliferation of such questionable ideas. I will begin by briefly talking about environmental education and the importance of philosophical analysis in this field of study. I will then critique education for sustainable development and in so doing will try to illustrate the importance of philosophical research that employs techniques of conceptual analysis.

One of the problems in environmental education has been the failure of its practitioners to reconcile definitions of environmental education with an a priori conception of education. It would seem peculiar, if not logically incoherent, to speak of environmental education in a way that was not consistent with a broader concept of education. It is important to understand that concepts such as *education* and *environmental education* are abstractions, or ideas that describe various perceptions. Further, one comes to understand concepts when one identifies those qualities that appear to be central to their meaning. For example, a person would understand the concept *table* or what constitutes *tableness* when he or she understands what qualities tables have in common. Similarly, one can come to some understanding of education when one identifies those qualities that appear central to the idea of being educated. Analysis can, therefore, be described as attempts to identify the most useful criteria to delineate the concept in question.

Although studying how a word functions will provide some understanding about the enterprise or phenomena that it represents, the analysis remains an interpretation of an abstraction in peoples' minds.

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It is a mistake to think of concepts as objects or concrete entities; they are nothing more than conventional signs or symbols. This is not a precise business. For this reason, the idea of a true, correct, or perfect statement about a concept is implausible. Analysis of concepts is essentially a dialectical business and such analyses are in constant need of reexamination and clarification (Wilson, 1969).

These points can be illustrated by attempting to identify some of the criteria useful in describing the educated person. For example, we might ask ourselves if acquisition of knowledge is a necessary condition. Many would affirm this, claiming we would not normally say that someone is educated but does not know anything. However, although the dissemination of information is an important function of schools, we might continue our analysis by asking if the accumulation of mere facts and disconnected information is enough. For example, my son at 9 years of age could go to a map of the world and identify an astonishing number of countries, but this was hardly sufficient to convince me that he was educated. We expect the educated person to have some understanding of the relationships between those bits of information that enable a person to make some sense of the world; the educated person should have some understanding about why a relationship exists. We might also wonder if the ability to think critically is a necessary criterion for the educated person. Again, we would expect to find considerable agreement; we would be reluctant to say that a person was educated if we judged that he or she could not think for him or herself.

Although this constitutes an abbreviated analysis, it does provide a glimpse at the general approach taken in this kind of research. The philosopher, thus, attempts to find out which of the possible criteria are necessary. It is important to note that this analysis cannot provide a

definitive or complete answer but only a collection of logical arguments of greater or less merit. This point is frequently misunderstood. For example, one of the pitfalls for researchers working in fields such as education and environmental education is to think as if abstract nouns were

the names of abstract or ideal objects: as if there were somewhere, in heaven if not on earth, *things* called "justice," "love" and "truth" [and environmental education]. Hence we come to believe that analysing concepts, instead of being what we have described it to be, is really a sort of treasure hunt in which we seek for a glimpse of these abstract objects. We find ourselves talking as if "What is justice?" [or environmental education?] was a question like "What is the capital of Japan?" (Wilson, 1969, p. 40)

What this means for environmental education is, of course, that the claim environmental education "does have definition and structure" (Hungerford, Peyton, & Wilke, 1983) is unlikely. Or, to attempt to solve the so-called definitional problem in environmental education in any fashion, let alone by the American Society for Testing and Materials (Marcinkowski, 1990-91), is misplaced. In the field of environmental education, we appear to be witnessing a treasure hunt for an infinitely illusive abstract object. Environmental education will surely continue to wallow along rocky shores until this field allows an important place for conceptual analysis within its research community.

My preview of conceptual analysis also identifies some criteria useful for understanding the term education. Having identified such essential criteria, in this case the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and the ability to think for oneself, I can now introduce the next task of the philosopher. This job is to examine the implications that logically follow from use of the concept to see if application of the term is consistent with those essential criteria teased out during analysis. Al-

though this analysis of education is by no means complete, the criteria proposed are sufficient to illustrate this task. At the same time, the adequacy of educating for sustainable development can be examined.

While environment education is in the midst of a conceptual muddle, the same can be said for *sustainable development*. For example, at the 1990 NAAEE conference, Slocombe and Van Bers (1991) reminded us that this term is only a concept and that it is characterized by a paucity of precision. Their observations are not unique. Like D. Scott Slocombe and Caroline Van Bers, some researchers acknowledge that there is no agreement about an overall goal for sustainable development (e.g., Huckle, 1991; Disinger, 1990; Rees, 1989). Analysis of the term has not yet been able to identify sufficient criteria to elucidate common meaning and coherence.

It is also possible that that conceptual coherence cannot be achieved. For Huckle (1991), the term sustainable development has entered the dialectic that characterizes modern environmentalism. For him, it has taken different, and possibly irreconcilable, meanings for technocentrists and ecocentrists. According to this view, the term is contested and its shared understanding is rendered impossible by inherent contradictions arising from these divergent world views. Disinger (1990) reports views that reinforce those doubts. He states, "To some, the term sustainable development is an oxymoron—a self-contained non sequitur between noun and modifier" (p. 3). It appears that there are those who are troubled by questions of logical consistency when *sustainable* is juxtaposed against *development*. If such inconsistency is borne out, the conceptual muddle that surrounds sustainable development will be perpetuated.

The observations reported in the previous two paragraphs accentuate the need for philosophical research, particularly conceptual analysis.

Clarifying common understandings of sustainable development and examining the logical coherence of their association will help to assess the usefulness of sustainable development. In the meantime, disagreement exists. The implication of this reality upon education is foreshadowed by planner William Rees (1989), who argued that a prerequisite to developing acceptable policies and plans for sustainable development is a satisfactory working definition of the concept. It seems equally improbable that we can accept any educational prescription in the absence of an adequate conceptualization of sustainable development. To borrow an analogy, "the situation seems to be parallel to someone wanting to be a shoplifter while not knowing what 'shoplifting' means" (Barrow & Woods, 1988, p. 8). It therefore seems unlikely that I should want anyone to educate my children for sustainable development when it is not clear what on Earth it is that they are aiming for.

Even if an adequate conceptualization of sustainable development were argued, we would still be concerned with the educational appropriateness of aiming for it. In spite of such misgivings, there does appear to be considerable momentum amongst environmental educators who wish to promote education for sustainable development. For example, John Disinger in his article "Environmental Education for Sustainable Development?" (1990) discusses the development of this momentum in North America. Noel Gough (1991) suggests that much environmental education in Australia is concerned with land protection and is often associated with *conservation for sustainable development*. And, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has looked to environmental education as a vehicle to promote "training, at various levels, of the personnel needed for the rational management of the environment in the view of

achieving sustainable development" (UNESCO, 1988, p. 6). In Canada, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy has stimulated the establishment of a Sustainable Development Education Program (SDEP). This program has been identified as part of the "new partnerships for education for sustainable development" (SDEP, 1992, p. 2). And its guiding principles include the development of "attitudes supportive of sustainable development through a process of animating meaningful change within the formal education system in Canada" (SDEP, 1992, p. 5). However, this momentum is not without anomalies, which should raise our suspicions.

Disinger (1990) also reports that many environmental educators have difficulty identifying their own positions, particularly with reference to the ecoanthropocentric continuum. However, he claims that educators generally place greater emphasis on "wise use" rather than on nonuse perspectives. Though the implications of these observations are not perfectly clear, they suggest that teachers have sought to identify their preferences in order to determine what perspectives to espouse. Gough (1991) was more explicit. According to his view, environmental education has been overcome by promoters of instrumental land values that are frequently associated with sustainable development. Does this mean that environmental education has frequently become a promotional tool? It seems thus far that many educators implicitly or explicitly assume that their task, education for sustainable development, involves the advancement of a particular agenda.

Inspection of comments in *Our Common Future* illustrates this problem:

Sustainable development has been described here in general terms. How are individuals in the real world to be persuaded or made to act in the common interest? The answer lies partly

in education, institutional development, and law enforcement. (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 46).

This statement suggests that sustainable development is in the common interest, and the public must be persuaded, or made, to pursue this end. Further, education can contribute to the process of persuasion or coercion required. This raises the following questions: Should education aim to advance a particular end such as sustainable development? Is it the job of education to make people behave in a particular way?

To seek answers to these questions, we must consider first the idea that environmental education should promote "training for the rational management of the environment in the view of achieving sustainable development" (UNESCO, 1988, p. 6). As I have argued elsewhere (Jickling, 1991), training is concerned with the acquisition of skills and abilities and frequently has instrumental connotations. We generally speak of training for something; we might be training for football or training for work in a trade. Further, training tends to be closely associated with the acquisition of skills that are perfected through repetition and practice and are minimally involved with understanding. Thus, the capacity for rational management is inconsistent with the means suggested for its achievement.

In contrast, we speak of a person being more or less well educated indicating a broader and less determinate understanding that transcends immediate instrumental values. We would not normally speak of educating "for" anything. To talk of educating *for* sustainable development is more suggestive of an activity like training or the preparation for the achievement of some instrumental aim. It is important to note that this position rests on several assumptions. First, sustainable development is an uncontested concept, and second, education is a tool to be used for its advancement. The first

point is clearly untrue and should be rejected; there is considerable skepticism about the coherence and efficacy of the term. The second assumption can also be rejected. The prescription of a particular outlook is repugnant to the development of autonomous thinking.

As we have seen in the earlier analysis, education is concerned with enabling people to think for themselves. Education for sustainable development, education for Deep Ecology (Drengson, 1991), or education for anything else is inconsistent with that criterion. In all cases, these phrases suggest a predetermined mode of thinking to which the pupil is expected to prescribe. Clearly, I would not want my children to be "educated for sustainable development." The very idea is contrary to the spirit of education. I would rather have my children educated than conditioned to believe that sustainable development constitutes a constellation of correct environmental views or that hidden beneath its current obscurity lies an environmental panacea.

However, having argued that we should not educate *for* sustainable development, it is quite a different matter to teach students about this concept. I would like my children to know about the arguments that support it and attempt to clarify it. But, I would also like them to know that

sustainable development is being criticized, and I want them to be able to evaluate that criticism and participate in it if they perceive a need. I want them to realize that there is a debate going on between a variety of stances, between adherents of an ecocentric worldview and those who adhere to an anthropocentric worldview. I want my children to be able to participate intelligently in that debate. To do so, they will need to be taught that those various positions also constitute logical arguments of greater or less merit, and they will need to be taught to use philosophical techniques to aid their understanding and evaluation of them. They will need to be well educated to do this.

For us, the task is not to educate for sustainable development. In a rapidly changing world, we must enable students to debate, evaluate, and judge for themselves the relative merits of contesting positions. There is a world of difference between these two possibilities. The latter approach *is* about education; the former is not.

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