

Another Point of View

Locating Environmental Education Between Modern Capitalism and Postmodern Socialism: A Reply to Lucie Sauvé

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In countries as diverse as Belgium, Mexico, Bangladesh and China, 1998 brought severe flooding which threatened the lives and livelihoods of countless millions of people. More and more disaster experts, development agencies, and citizens' groups are supporting the theory that the globalisation of economies is largely responsible for such human misery. Structural adjustment programmes, deregulation and the opening of markets may be good for international capital, but such processes increase inequalities, encourage people and countries to over-exploit natural resources, and contribute to reductions in spending on social and environmental welfare. The global environmental crisis cannot be separated from the global economic crisis and any analysis of the causes and possible solution to environmental problems should start from this fact.

A Framework for Analysis

Rather than locating her analysis within the framework provided by a global capitalism undergoing profound change, Lucie Sauvé prefers to start from "two dominant cultural trends—modernity and postmodernity." She fails to acknowledge that dominant forms of modernity are those shaped by and shaping the material realities of global capitalism, and that what some recognise as postmodernity is the result of continuing capitalist restructuring to overcome related economic and environmental problems. It is no accident that the discourse of sustainable development has risen to prominence in the past two decades as economic liberalism has accentuated problems of underdevelopment and environmental degradation. Disorganised capitalism has proved less sustainable than organised capitalism and the political debate surrounding sustainability is part of a larger debate focussing on what mode of regulation will allow capitalism to survive in a viable form. Such debates are pre-occupied by the kind of reformism that seeks a new form of social democracy or "third way" in

Europe, they also create space to raise genuinely radical alternatives (Giddens, 1994). They point up the continuing contradictions of capitalism and capitalist schooling and prompt consideration of ecological socialism and democratic education.

The author's framework is too reluctant to acknowledge the complex nature of modernity, its many dimensions, and its contradictory elements. Critical theory has developed to explain why the "major hopes" of modernity have not been realised, suggesting that economic power, technocracy, and instrumental reason have exploited human and non human nature rather than allowing them to realise their true potential (Kellner, 1989; Gibson, 1986; Young, 1989; Goldblatt, 1996). It seeks to set a partial and arrested enlightenment on a new path of sustainable development, by subjecting the economic and political spheres (the market and the state) to discursive democracy or popular control guided by the kind of communicative reason still found within the public and private spheres (Dryzek, 1987). Critical education or participative action research is central to such a renewed modern project or constructive postmodernity, and is well exemplified by the more radical interpretations of Local Agenda 21 that assist communities to empower themselves and so gain greater control over their lives and environments (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selman, 1996). Only when the economic, political and cultural spheres are fully democratised will people be able to realise their common interest in forms of development that are ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable.

The critical theory and notions of participative action research that underpin critical education for sustainability embrace a philosophy of knowledge that lies between modernism and postmodernism. This is prepared to accept the cultural mediation of reality, a plurality of texts and voices, and the limits of grand narratives, but rejects total relativism and nihilism by maintaining commitments to partial truths and a realistic utopianism. Participative action research validates ideas generated by dialectical and systemic materialism by applying theory to practice and incorporates concepts of radical democracy that have long been part of the counter culture and practice of modernity and modern education (Wright, 1989).

Environmental Education

A multitude of environmental educations has been socially constructed during the modern era. These reflect diverse material interests, ideologies and utopias, and are more or less conservative, radical or utopian in their

diagnoses and prescriptions. Socially critical environmental education originated with anarchist and socialist educators in the 19th century, and was sustained in this century largely by urban and community educators (Shotton, 1993; Ward & Fyson, 1973). Some use the term “socially critical” in ways that fail to anchor it securely on socialist foundations, while others seek to attach the term to romantic, utopian and reactionary prescriptions linked to deep ecology. Rather than seeing environmental education “take a step backward in the official international discourse” during the 1990s, it would be more realistic to admit that such discourse has always been contradictory. While it is predominantly reformist and technocratic (education to promote the greening of capitalism or sustainable economic growth), it contains language and rhetoric (mentions of empowerment and social justice) that can be turned to advantage. There is no one single contemporary environmental education or education for sustainability, even in official discourse (Sauvé, 1996), but there are socially critical versions of environmental education and education for sustainability that are far more worthy of our attention and advocacy than others.

The Conceptual Issue

Some socially critical and socialist environmental educators in the United Kingdom and elsewhere now prefer to use the term education for sustainability rather than environmental education for a number of reasons. Firstly environmental education carries too much “baggage” and is too closely associated with nature study and the natural sciences. Secondly education for sustainability gives environmental education a sharper focus on the social construction of nature and the environment. It unites the natural and social sciences, and environment and development education, in a new philosophical framework underpinned by critical theory and pedagogy and linked to community and citizenship education. Thirdly education for sustainability addresses major events and debates on the world stage. It allows us to better confront the contradictions between rhetoric and reality and suggest alternative ways of reorganising the economy, environment, society and education. Fourthly education for sustainability, like education for democracy, peace or justice, can provide a democratic means of promoting values that should lie at the heart of education as a process of enlightenment. Critical education for sustainability is not based on a single preferred construction of sustainability. Rather it is a process of critical reflection and action on those forms of technology and social organisation that may allow us to live sustainably with one another and the rest of

nature. Participative action research as an educational process of praxis and ideology critique allows students and teachers to research diverse technologies and discourses that claim the label of sustainability, while at the same time clarifying their ethical and political commitments.

The model of three interpenetrating spheres outlined in the discussion paper is a less satisfactory framework for conceptualising sustainability and education for sustainability, than that advanced by critical theory. It begs questions about the factors shaping social and environmental relations; hints at ecological idealism in suggesting we have an “appropriate niche”; and fails to collapse the dualism between ecocentrism and technocentrism. It rightly hints at the way in which adjectival or transformative educations might best be combined within education for global citizenship but fails to suggest the key concepts and ideas that such an education might explore. Sustainability requires the extension of citizens’ rights and responsibilities, across space, generations and species, yet there is no discussion of the forms of cosmopolitan democracy that might allow this to happen (Doherty & de Geus, 1996; Held, 1995).

Environmental Education Practice

Yes most environmental education is part of the problem rather than the solution. Advocates of education for sustainability do not seek to discredit progressive and radical elements of environmental education nor do they neglect the social realities that have prevented such elements flourishing to a greater extent. The Tbilisi Declaration and other statements do contain the essence of a critical education for sustainability but more recent statements sharpen and update the focus while bringing in new concerns. Socially critical environmental educators have played a leading role in explaining and confronting the limits to environmental education and it is partly the resulting learning that has prompted them to now advocate education for sustainability (Fien, 1993a, 1993b; Gough, 1997; Huckle & Sterling, 1996; Plant, 1998).

The Proposal of Education for Sustainability

The contradictions surrounding the definition and practice of sustainable development have been debated in the literature for at least a decade (Redclift, 1987). The major error of the author’s paper is equate all education for sustainability with promotion of the dominant discourse: a weak

version of sustainability that equates with the greening of capitalism. Such a construct may temporarily overcome capitalism's economic and environmental problems, but it will not sustain ecological capital nor will it reduce inequalities or promote democracy and cultural diversity. To focus on "the fundamental core," or a conservative interpretation of the World Commission on the Environment, and suggest that advocates of education for sustainability seek to promote this rather than subject all such constructs to ideology critique and reconstruction, is to grossly misunderstand our position (Jickling & Spork, 1998). Yes the dominant discourse masks contradictions and is a "useful slogan" for the powers that be, but education for sustainability seeks to expose contradiction, ideology and politics and allow learners to glimpse genuinely democratic and empowering meanings. It is because sustainability, like democracy, poses conceptual, ethical and cultural problems that it is an ideal vehicle for an education based on critical theoretical foundations.

Conceptual Issue

Yes realising development that is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable (Figure 2 in Lucie Sauvé's discussion paper, p. 14) is problematic and is exercising the minds of theorists and activists of diverse political persuasions. There is a much literature and practical experience on which the education for sustainability curriculum can draw, but to suggest that it is sufficient to merely educate about sustainability sells students short. Rather than a "banking" education that tells them the facts about sustainability, they need and deserve a "transformative" education that provides them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to realise sustainability democratically along with others. Educating for sustainability has much in common with educating for democracy. One learns by real or simulated involvement with democracy. One learns by doing: by reflecting and acting on democratically chosen alternatives. Such ideas guide the "greening" of many schools where pupils are being educated for sustainability as part of Local Agenda 21 projects in their communities (Adams & Ingham, 1998).

Ethical Issue

Sustainability raises ethical issues as we can conserve and enhance ecological capital in ways that either promote or reduce equity. Sustainable development can meet the needs of the poor or the rich. It can meet the

needs of other sentient creatures and future generations or ignore issues of inter-species and inter-generational equity. Critical educators believe that education should promote equity and democracy and that education for sustainability should therefore explore those forms of sustainable development that promote these values. We do not seek to “inculcate predetermined choices” or impose them on future generations. We seek to inform critical reflection and action whilst safeguarding students from indoctrination with the procedural safeguards built into critical pedagogy and participative action research. We will not agree with the criticisms in the discussion paper since they grossly misrepresent our position.

Cultural Issue

Critical education’s debate with postmodernism has led to greater respect for local and indigenous knowledge. Deconstruction and reconstruction is at the heart of such education but it adopts a healthy scepticism towards the romanticism and idealism associated with some accounts of traditional cultures. Development education has long sensitised itself to Southern voices, ecological imperialism, and sustainable livelihood development, and these concepts are now found within the official rhetoric of such education in Europe if not elsewhere in the world (Development Education Association, 1998).

Pedagogical Observations

Yes, critical pedagogy or participative action research is not unique to education for sustainability and is used by some environmental education practitioners. It is shared with other transformative educations but is often robbed of its critical elements when adopted by conservative and liberal educators. It is based in dialectical and systemic philosophies that suggest that nature, society and thought are ongoing processes; that these processes are always mediated or revealed through thought and language; and that knowledge is best validated through democratic enquiry or praxis (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Gadotti, 1996).

And let us be cautious before giving all proponents of education for sustainability the benefit of the doubt and agreeing that they are well intentioned. They are not a single homogeneous group with similar beliefs, values, politics and practices. They include right wing tokens on influential commissions; apolitical and idealist improvisers at educational conferences,

and left wing propagandists in classrooms who deserve our scorn. All can promote education for sustainability by using a sales pitch, but the duty of critical proponents is to unmask their ideology and reveal the true interests they serve.

The Proposal of Education for Sustainability

Sustainable futures like sustainable development are open to various forms of realisation. In the United Kingdom futures education has played a role in the development of education for sustainability but it often utopian rather than realistic in its assumptions. Dominant future scenarios do reflect anthropocentric and Judeo-Christian assumptions, but as with sustainability there are a wide range of alternative discourses. It is rather ironic to see John Fien, a leading advocate of socially critical education for sustainability, praised for his pedagogical innovation while the theoretical basis of his work is ignored. The writer is surely aware that John is a leading advocate and defender of education for sustainability.

Education for the Development of Responsible Societies

I and others would prefer to call this education for citizenship. Such education is widely advocated by national and international governments and non-government organizations and should give equal attention to rights and responsibilities. It should embrace the economic, political, cultural and environmental dimensions of citizens' lives at all scales from the local to the global, and should prompt theoretical and practical reflection and action on those forms of governance that can ensure intra and inter-generational and inter-species equity (Lynch, 1992). Such governance allows the common interest in sustainability or "human security" to find institutional expression and promotes continued co-evolution with the rest of nature. It allows the broader concept of responsibility outlined in the paper but the author should be cautious before suggesting that responsibility is any less contentious and problematic than sustainability as a focus for education. We all know what the political right means by education for responsibility and indeed human rights education is partly a response to schooling as a means of social control.

Critical education for sustainability already has strong links with critical education for global citizenship and this can promote culturally and bioregionally relevant sustainable development with equity. Education

reform in England continues to largely exclude critical alternatives but Tony Blair's rhetoric of citizenship, community and responsibility, provides useful ground on which to argue our case (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998; Panel for Education for Sustainable Development, 1998; Tam, 1998).

In Conclusion

I am sorry to announce that in this part of the world the nature, legitimacy and importance of dominant forms of environmental education have long been questioned. Despite its transformative rhetoric, the reality of environmental education as practised has too often suggested that it has become a "mere fashion or slogan" that fails to confront the real causes of unsustainable development or address radical solutions (Gough, 1997). Growing attention to sustainability has provided the opportunity for a fresh start and what will hopefully be a temporary phase in the continuing development of environmental education. Then sustainability will join democracy as a concept that students begin to discursively construct and realise within coherent programmes of global citizenship education.

I would urge Lucie Sauvé and other contributors to this debate to reconsider the theory and practice of those who advocate an education for sustainability based on critical theory and pedagogy. We modestly claim to have a comprehensive educational framework supported by well-developed critical theories of the environment and education. Such theories do not neglect the complex nature of disorganised capitalism and can suggest many reasons why the Thessaloniki conference proved so disappointing for so many who attended. Indeed "the affair is not over and the debate is not closed"—but if environmental education or education for sustainability is to make real progress, critical socialist educators like myself would urge that we start from the real realities of modern capitalism and that we do not ignore the hopes of those workers and citizens who continue to struggle for a postmodern version of socialism.

Recent decades have exposed the limits of free market capitalism, state socialism, and social democracy. We have a responsibility in our teaching to address those limits and consider alternative ways of regulating economic and social life. A third way to socialism that embraces sustainability and cosmopolitan democracy should appear on political and educational agendas, along with other possibilities, as we hold fast to our values and continue to educate for sustainability.

Notes on Contributor

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