

Relieving Modern Day Atlas of an Illusory Burden: Abandoning the Hypermodern Fantasy of an Education to Manage the Globe¹

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Abstract

The core of this article is a vigorous critique of planetary education for sustainable development and, emerging from this critique, a restatement of some alternatives, which compensate for the excesses of such globalized education. Drawing from a variety of perspectives—philosophy, sociology, geography, anthropology, psychology, pedagogy, biology and others—it is argued that the idea of an education for a sustainable future is founded on untenable assumptions. Contrary to contentions by promoters of sustainable development, who claim that the application of this ideology in all of education is the ultimate solution to humanity's problems, evidence and testimonies are provided that suggest exacerbation of these problems. Examples of such perverse effects are described with respect to child development and preservation of diversity in people, cultures, places, practices and languages.

Résumé

Le cœur de cet article est une vigoureuse critique de l'éducation planétaire en matière de développement durable et, découlant de cette critique, la reformulation de quelques options de rechange pour compenser les excès d'une telle éducation. À partir d'une variété de perspectives – philosophique, sociologique, géographique, anthropologique, psychologique, pédagogique, biologique, notamment – il est argué que l'idée d'une éducation en vue d'un avenir durable est fondée sur des hypothèses insoutenables. Les promoteurs du développement durable prétendent que l'application de cette idéologie à toute l'éducation constitue la solution définitive aux problèmes de l'humanité. Les preuves et les témoignages suggèrent plutôt une exacerbation de ces problèmes. Des exemples de ces effets

pervers sont rapportés au sujet du développement de l'enfant et de la préservation de la diversité des personnes, des cultures, des lieux, des pratiques et des langues.

We have all been exposed to discourses about the failures of environmental education to save the world. Since it hasn't fulfilled its promises, we must urgently act to avoid catastrophe. Accordingly, environmental education must be changed.

I wish to question the assumptions underlying such a diagnostic and question the new prescription. More specifically, I question the idea that schools be the main source of innovation and adaptation where an army of pupils will be trained to build a sustainable future. I do not, however, question the importance of schooling to accompany the youth's development of varied and numerous skills needed to face our predicament.

I question the idea that schools be places in which to reform society, places to begin and implement radical changes—though I don't question the need for radical changes in society.

I question the allegations that environmental education, by focusing too much on the stories of ecology and natural sciences, has missed some important and essential aspects—though I don't deny the essential need to integrate and hold together a variety of stories.

I question the charges, sometimes laid, that we have been too local and too centred on nature, charges that our educational practices have been too reflexive and not actively enough involved. In fact, it could well be that we have generally not paid enough attention to our local nature, our local history, and our local people and have been too centred on relatively inaccessible global problems. It could very well be that we suffer from a useless and tiring form of hyperactivity. Using the words of José Ortega y Gasset, Karl von Maltzahn (1994) notes how we tend to forget "the mute things which are all around us" and how "we walk blindly among them, our gaze fixed on remote enterprises, embarked upon the conquest of distant schematic cities" (p. 100)

Accordingly, my hypothesis is that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) single vision of a global and total education for a sustainable future, in all nations, for all people, for all ages, in every context and every curricula is a form of totalitarian omnipotent hypermodernity. It would seem to exacerbate some of the most debilitating aspects of western capitalist and industrial modernity and export them everywhere on earth.² If it were to succeed, it would mean a

kind of global monoculture. If it were to fail, it could also mean another kind of global monoculture: the contradictory free-market monopoly. Both are nonetheless monocultures and both are alike. Planetary education for sustainable development is a sure symptom of a pathology I call “disembodied globomania.” The following reflections aim to demonstrate that UNESCO’s proposal appears to be based on mistaken foundations: erroneous conceptual, philosophical, anthropological, biological, psychological, pedagogical, educational, political and geographical foundations. I also indicate what I consider to be some of the foundational components of the long tradition of environmental education that risk being flushed away by UNESCO’s most recent fantasies.

The text is organized around a series of propositions. Because of space constraints, not every one of these is analyzed in detail. Some are accompanied by a counter proposition stemming from UNESCO’s recent proposals. This structure reflects a proposition I advance. We should learn to recognize the components of a dystopia that are an integral part of a utopia. Education for sustainable development on a planetary scale is a utopia inherently encompassing a dystopia.

Resist the Educational System’s Fast-Forward and Rush-Ahead Movement Towards Every New Fashion that Promises a Shining Future

As a practitioner in the field since 1978, I’m overwhelmed at the rapid turnover of terms to designate education which considers relationships with the environment. There are now 50 terms for such forms of education in the index of Lucie Sauvé’s (1997) book and the rhythm of production seems to accelerate. Parents, teachers and other environmental educators who attend to children on an almost daily basis cannot be expected to cope with this output. In such a frenetic context, I doubt the wisdom of the urgent reform pushed for by UNESCO. Instead of a fast forward movement, I prefer a radical slow down and a close look at the present and the past. Even children can be introduced to such an attentiveness and to historical perspectives. Thus, we might avoid pulling children into our own distress and searching. In fact, teachers, parents and students can become what Neil Postman (1992) calls a “Loving Resistance Fighter” and learn what Wendell Berry (1992) names “The Joy of Sales Resistance.” My hope is that we acquire the ability, strength and wisdom to raise the following questions when faced with omnipotent fixes promising a shining future. Whom will they serve? Who will benefit? Who will lose? What will they replace? Who needs

them? Such questions have been raised by Wendell Berry, David Orr, Neil Postman and Charlene Spretnak.³ In trying to answer these questions, I generally believe most of the proposed reforms would serve interests other than those of the pupils, the teachers and their communities. I suspect they would mostly benefit those who propose and lobby for them—notably those professional global curriculum designers and global educational kit writers who depend on such a runaway education. Sometimes their interest will match the well being of students, teachers and communities but many times it will not. Too much emphasis on a planetary outlook can bring about global, disembodied, and placeless curriculum or programs. This signifies that one must seriously examine the agenda of people who insist on the urgent need to change the totality of education, even more so when the proposed changes are to be on a planetary scale.

In that vein, Neil Postman (1992) discusses how competing world-views clash. They, he suggests, are generally not additive but mutually exclusive. The coming of new technologies and new world-views eliminates old ones. One must then ask what is to be lost by systematically introducing messages associated with sustainable development in school programs around the earth. What would they replace? I am afraid that studying problems of managing the resources of the planet for a sustainable yield and studying the environment as a problem to be solved would probably replace other approaches to the environment. I'm afraid that it would involve trading in, both the quality and the quantity of the rare hours spent outdoors. The few opportunities to be in touch with one's local history, the natural and cultural history of one's community and region could be lost or reduced. Strangely, David Sobel (1995, p. 13) reports that simple outdoor moments of childhood in "wild or semi-wild place" are identified as key factors in motivating adult environmental engagement. Many are convinced of their importance and worried of losing these moments. Rachel Carson, Edith Cobb, Neil Evernden, Edward Hoffman, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, Barry Lopez, John Livingston, Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, Paul Shepard and finally, Stephen Talbott, are some of those who have voiced such concerns.⁴

This then constitutes the geographical or spatio-temporal and directional errors of educating for sustainable development: too fast, wrong scale, placeless, and wrong direction.

Remain Vigilant in the Face of the Ideology of Sustainable Future as One Should be in the Face of Any Other Ideology

The reduction of the Catholic Church's role in Québec has created a vacuum that calls for the constitution of new unifying theories, new metanarratives, new transcendent purposes, new cosmologies, and/or the revival of some ancient one's. This lack of an overarching story that could sustain one's life from crib to coffin is manifest in nations and cultures affected by western thought. While the absence of a total and coherent cosmology can be painful in some moments, we must refrain from embracing, at first sight, the cosmology of any bliss merchant. Education for sustainable development raises even more unsettling issues. Should we embrace a new cosmology captured by the term "sustainable futures," and advanced by such a strongly alienated people? Should we then export and impose such a cosmology around the earth?

With any ideology, there exists the dangers of reification or objectification. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) define reification as "the apprehension of human phenomena . . . of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic law, or manifestations of divine will" (p. 89). This applies to our "modality of consciousness" to our "theoretical systems" and then not only "the mental constructions of intellectuals" but also "the consciousness of the man in the street" (p. 89-90). Reification is a way we humans have of forgetting our authorship of ideas and theories, a way of objectification, a way of transforming them into things and then forgetting we have done it. Neil Evernden (1985) examines how this has happened in our relationships with nature through an idea called "resources." We have forgotten it was social construction and we have reified this idea of "resources" by bringing "all of creation into categories of utility" in a "modern religion" called "resourcism" (p. 23). For him, in "describing something as a resource we seem to have cause to protect it. But all we really have is a licence to exploit it" (p. 23). That specific reification transforms the whole world as resources for our use. Resourcism even transforms people into marketable objects when one treats them as human resources or human capital. Sustainable development is clearly victim of this particular form of reification called "resourcism" (Livingston, 1994, 1981). But there is more. Sustainable development, itself an ideology, tends to be reified by its proponents when it is advanced as an absolute necessity.

At this point, I only insist that sustainable development be recognized as an ideology, an idea, a proposed paradigm or whatever one wishes to call it. It is thus important to examine its gestation, incubation and evolution.

It is also important to observe who influences it, who the proponents are, what the applications are. It is ever more important when the avowed aim is to apply that ideology systematically and totally to every human community on earth.

Ideologies act as sorts of maps which guide our understanding and our actions. Travelling in the USSR in 1968, E.F. Schumacher recalls seeing some very large churches that never appeared on the maps of Leningrad. Most people are familiar with such dissonant experiences and often respond with the classic saying “the map is not the territory.” But what do we do with our dissonance and our maps then? As he recalls it, Schumacher (1977) remained perplexed until “I ceased to suspect the sanity of my perceptions and began, instead, to suspect the soundness of the maps” (p. 1). But many will not question the maps and live the world as defined by the maps. The world-view provided by the map hides other possibilities. David Turnbull (1989/1993) goes further and transforms the aphorism into “maps are territories,” meaning here, that a map does transform both the territory and the experience. In terms of relating to the world, the change is more drastic than the notion of a “cultural filter” developed by David Pepper (1984/1989, p. 6-7). If one does not remain vigilant, there is the clear danger of transforming the territory—now the whole world—so that it fits the much incomplete map of sustainable development. I have had too many dissonant experiences with the maps and the objectification of both sustainable development and the dominant ideology to use them as my sole guides, even less as educational guides.

What are we to do then with our dissonances? At least recognize their existence. That accomplished, our dissonant experiences can be further explored, compared, confronted, discussed, documented and shared. The evolution of ideas, even the evolution of reified ideas, has been shown to come through forms of heresy, heterodoxy. In addition to Fritz Schumacher, others have paid attention to this phenomenon including Gregory Bateson (1979/1984), Morris Berman (1989), Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch (1975) and of course Thomas Khun (1962/1970). Minimally then, we have to stop using the name UNESCO as a magical mantra that automatically validates anything. The same is true with the idea called sustainable development.

Sensitive to the importance of such dissonance, Neil Evernden (1985) hopes that we keep enough sanity so “that when the story turns out to be too far removed from actual experience to be reliable, we still have the skill to return to the world beneath the categories and re-establish our connection with it” (p. 56). This hope is also Paul Shepard’s (1982) conviction:

Beneath the veneer of civilization . . . lies not the barbarian and animal, but the human in us who knows . . . the necessity of a rich non human environment, play at being animals, the discipline of natural history, juvenile tasks with simple tools, the expressive arts of receiving food as a spiritual gift rather than as a product, the cultivation of metaphorical significance of natural phenomena of all kinds . . . and the profound claims and liberation of ritual initiation and subsequent stages of adult mentorship. (p. 129)

For Paul Shepard, there remains “a secret person undamaged in every individual, aware of the validity of these, sensitive to their right moments in our lives” (p. 129). My own hope is that environmental education can still be sensitive to these moments in our lives and not only be embarked upon the conquest of distant schematic cities.

Here then we see how education for sustainable development can commit the philosophical errors of reification and reductionism.

Resist the Dogmatic Discourses About the Inevitability of Globalization, Be They From the Left, the Right or Any Other Position

There is the arrogant proposition and omnipotent illusion that the aim and the final destiny of humans is to manage planet Earth. The folly should be evident to anyone a bit familiar with management and life sciences. Management is about planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. The number of species on Earth is in the millions; the number of individuals is probably in the hundreds of billions; and then the number of relationships is far greater. To pretend that we can manage life on earth is absurdly ignorant. This explains the charge that such management implies monoculture (Livingston, 1986, 1994). The volume of information to accomplish this task would be astonishing. As an illustration, the example of a map store in Yarmouth, Maine, which has just built a scale model of the Earth, 42 feet in diameter, will provide a sense of magnitude. The printed data on the three storey high model rotating in the lobby of the store is equivalent to 214 CD-ROMs. According to builders, the average persons reads one CD-ROM worth of text in a lifetime. It would thus take about 200 lives just to read the information on this image of the earth (DeLorme Publishing Company, 1998). One must bear in mind that this is only a scale model, without all the essentials: lives, waters, minerals, soils, air, weather, relationships and all the rest. Pretending that we can manage the Earth is crazy and an ultimate in arrogance. It is a sure sign of a lack of humility and a sign of infantile omnipotence. To borrow the words of 83 year old John Hay (1998), in a plain and liberating way, “I want to be

freed from the assumption that we can carry the world on our shoulders” (p. 52). This is the motivation behind the title of my paper. This assumption is not only a useless weight, it is a catastrophe breeder. Here is how Wendell Berry (1992) puts it:

The abstractions of sustainability can ruin the world just as surely as the abstractions of industrial economics. Local life may be as much endangered by those who would “save the planet” as by those who would “conquer the world.” For “saving the planet” calls for abstract purposes and central powers that cannot know—and thus will destroy—the integrity of local nature and local community. (p. 23)

In exactly the same vein, David Orr (1994) tells of the vital importance of local places:

we are inescapably place-centric creatures shaped in important ways by the localities of our birth and upbringing. . . . the environmental movement has grown out of the efforts of courageous people to preserve and protect particular places. . . . problems that occur all over the world are not necessarily global problems, and some truly global problems may be solvable only by lots of local solutions. . . . a purely global focus tends to reduce the earth to a set of abstractions that blur what happens to real people in specific settings. . . . we have not succeeded in making a global economy ecologically sustainable, and I doubt that we will ever be smart enough or wise enough to do it on a global scale. (p. 160-162)

So we can never carry the world on our shoulders. The earth carries us. In fact, I strongly believe that key moments of an environmental education experience are when a sudden shift in perception happens. Instead of our more habitual attitude as being manipulators of our world, we suddenly feel engulfed in a world which totally supports us. It is then the world that manipulates us. These experiences seem to be strongly dependent on non-human environments. At some point, one can move back and forth between these sorts of experiences and feel what Paul Shepard (1982) names “the mystery of kinship: likeness but difference” (p. 10), neither fuzzy boundary, nor rigid armour. According to Shepard, our society tends to prevent such experiences. Our society would depend on “infantile qualities” such as “fear of separation, fantasies of omnipotence, oral preoccupation, tremors of helplessness, and bodily incompetence and dependence” (p. 14). Our society would depend on a blocked maturation, an “ontogenic crippling” (p. 15), to which I come later. For now, I just wish to point out that global sustainable development seems to depend on these contradictory qualities: a fear of the actual world and an omnipotent belief that we can build a better one to our own image and desires. The message could thus

sound like: be afraid of the bodily world, of the organic world, but put your trust in the hands of an elite class of omnipotent planetary managers who will engineer a shining future. In such a world, those who are talented enough will be able to graduate from playing in school yards with earth-balls and earth-balloons they carry in their earth back-packs, to play on the computer with earth-models, to one day be real planetary managers.

In a perspective that meets Paul Shepard's concern, Christopher Lasch (1984) questions "the liberal tradition of the rational ego" who could possibly manage the environment:

What if technological progress is an illusion? What if it leads not to greater control over the physical environment but to an increasingly unpredictable environment, a return of the repressed capacity for destruction in nature herself? What if the impulse behind technological development (though not necessarily behind the spirit of scientific inquiry) is itself pathological? What if the drive to make ourselves entirely independent of nature, which never succeeds in reaching its goal, originates in the unconscious attempt to restore the illusion of infantile omnipotence? (p. 222)

The more we try to control and manage nature, the more it can erupt. To me, this seems to be a fact, not an idea. Think for example of a dammed river where drainage has been tentatively controlled and where humans have settled in the flood plain. When the control mechanisms fail to order nature, the dis-order will have a much greater impact on the settlements along the river. It is not the environment that needs to be managed and controlled but our uses and abuses of it (Livingston, 1986).

Here we witness again the geographical or spatio-temporal errors: wrong place and wrong time, plus an error of scale: too large. We also witness the errors that Edgar Morin (1973) has linked to "hypercomplexity," to facing vastly complex systems: "hubris" or excessiveness, immoderation, disorder. For Morin, "sapiens demens" was born with sapiens sapiens. However, when hubris moves from a local action and impact to global ones, it is much more dangerous.

Denounce and Fight Against a Form of Totalitarianism that is Manifest in Education for a Sustainable Future, the Way it is Being Imposed and the Way it Despises Other Perspectives

I will not indulge at length on this item, but just read on. "A sustainable society will be a society in which *all* the aspects of civil and personal life will be compatible with sustainable development and where *all* the services of the state at *all* levels will work together for the progress of that society"

[Emphasis added] (UNESCO, 1997a, p. 27). I have italicized the totalizing words. I reject an education built on such totalitarian ideas applied around earth. UNESCO's recent documents show a clear intolerance to all that is outside of the just line that it defines. The documents despise other perspectives that don't share this single vision. The avowed aim is to convince everyone. All other positions are unwelcome and called divisive unless they adhere. These documents are loaded with such gems of intolerance that need to be picked, studied and mused about from environmental and educational perspectives.

The recent proposals don't seem to recognize the many and different ways of looking at nature, of looking at the world and our situation. Sustainable development is but one story that cannot claim to embrace all the varied environmental visions presented and discussed by numerous authors such as David Pepper (1984/1989), Ian Simmons (1993) or Mitchell Thomashow (1995). Sustainable development cannot be *the* overarching new cosmology.

Here then we witness the political and social error of education for sustainable development: totalitarianism and intolerance.

Respect the Diversity of Cultures, the Regional and Local Areas of Expertise, and Authorities in the Fields of Education and Environment

UNESCO affirms: "Reorienting all of education in the direction of sustainability concerns all the levels of formal and non formal education in all countries" (UNESCO 1997b, p. 2). I doubt that the proposed new cosmology, the pseudo-scientific reified story of sustainable development, is what we need on a planetary scale. Again, as noticed by Paul Shepard (1982, p. 1), we western people have so much information and know so much about the environment and still almost nothing has improved. We are the societies which are having the most radical impacts on the biosphere. Should we globally export our knowledge and its underlying cosmology?

It has been shown, notably by Eugene Anderson (1996), that traditional knowledge, sometimes unscientific beliefs and even false irrational ones, have often been better guides to preserve environmental qualities. Such knowledge and its accompanying language and practices can be lost, in fact, they are being lost at an alarming rate (Ehrenfeld, 1989; Sack, 1992; Spretnak, 1997). Paradoxically then, a systematic, total and global application of the ideology of an education for sustainable development seems to threaten the diversity that is cherished by the promoters of this ideology.

The error is now anthropological and again political and geographical: lack of diversity, excess of uniformity, cultural imperialism or what the French now call “pensée unique” (Ramonet, 1995).

Differentiate the Occupations and the Preoccupations of Children from those of Adults

From the preceding sections, it seems important that we recognize that the essential content and concepts pertaining to a sustainable future are matters to be debated and discussed by adults. Here I wish to protest against UNESCO and other organizations that aim at assaulting children with preoccupations and responsibilities for which they are not equipped to cope. We should remember that the future of a society has traditionally been established by its elders and in consideration of the past. We should then recall that there are differences between the universe of children and the universe of adults. Finally we must acknowledge that the differences between those universes tend to be reduced and blurred (Postman, 1982/1994; Shepard, 1982) and recognize that education for sustainability would probably contribute to such a sad trend.

There is clear evidence of our existence as a neotenic species. Neoteny is the name given to what is believed to be a strategy of evolution that works by retarding maturation and keeping larval characteristic well into adulthood, such as a lack of hair, a large brain, a general openness, a certain playfulness and other juvenile traits. This indeterminacy of the larval stages opens up vast possibilities of ontogenic adaptation in an environmental incubator. For some, this very long period of social incubation is a form of domestication. The traits of humans resemble those of domesticates: plump and round, docile and submissive, reduced mobility and others. These issues of neoteny and domestication have been discussed by a number of authors.⁵

But one way or an other a living being finally matures, even if wild, domestic, or neotenic. That is, a person becomes an adult, ages, and then dies. One’s development is never sustained. We can refuse to accept this but it happens. But one has to wonder. If one is constantly preoccupied by the future, by sustainable development, can one ever become an adult? Maybe such a future orientation signifies that one is blocked at an adolescent stage, obnubilated by broad global unifying and omnipotent theories, the hallmark of adolescence before initiation (Livingston, 1994; Shepard, 1982). Surely one cannot be enthralled during a whole lifetime by the impossible idea of managing planet earth. As seductive as such an idea can be to adolescents, at some point, one as to fall on his/her feet and be initiated into the possibilities and limits of a human life.

Our maturation, the continuation of our ontogeny, is a social and a psychological process. It used to happen through different sorts of initiations and rituals and through different types of bonding and separating experiences (Shepard, 1982). These implied some sort of suffering, of passages that brought some humility. We now beg for a way of coming home. A society that forfeits these humbling experiences, and doesn't initiate its members into the ferocious beauty and limits of life, sustains the illusions of eternal youth and an absence of limits. This lack of maturation is a sure ally of a capitalist society driven by consuming ever more goods to sustain either the illusion of omnipotence and eternal youth or to quiet the painful crave for initiation into the beautiful limits of a human life.

From a different perspective, Neil Postman (1982/1994) arrives at somewhat the same conclusion in his *The Disappearance of Childhood*. In a society like ours, the differences between adults and children tend to dissolve. In a society that is more and more dominated and driven by images, aspects of the world are disclosed to everybody. It is then possible for children to have access to representations that were the prerogative of the adult world and who then look like little adults. All the while, we get childish adults. With Postman we start to see clearer links with ontogenic crippling and the paradoxical disappearance of childhood. Adults with childish fixations, and adultified-children are analyzed by Postman through television, entertainment, music, politics, commerce, religion, clothing, food, games, sports leagues, athletics, crimes, sex, drug abuse, and again language.

We can guess what happens when issues of sustainability are pushed into schools. Complex and difficult issues regarding our relationships with our surroundings, to which adolescents are just opening, are imposed on young children. All the while, instead of maturing, adults are stuck with an ideology of managing the earth. The possible result: fearful childhood and adults clinging to the juvenile illusion of omnipotence.

In such a neotenic context of arrested development where adults and children merge, the hypothesis of Christopher Lasch (1984) becomes more painfully poignant. The illusion of technological progress is a pathological attempt at restoring an illusion of omnipotence and it causes a return of the capacity for destruction in nature. Global planetary management and controls, such as the proposal of international sustainable development, are precisely the cause of so many problems.

The error we now face is ontogenic and it creates pedagogical and psychological errors. These errors then feed into the other aspects identified elsewhere in this paper. This is the dialectic of "quasi-solutions and residue problems" (Ehrenfeld, 1978, p. 107).

Recognize the Use and the Limits of Militancy and its Appropriate Places: Differentiate Activism and Education

We should recognize the possible perverse effects of a pedagogy too militant, a pedagogy much too centred on the assumption that we live in an untenable world needing to be reformed. It causes a backlash. This is linked to all of the above items.

With militancy, there exists however an aspect that is more troubling than the well known backlash phenomenon. When I ponder the UNESCO saying that schools “be tools to reform society” (UNESCO, 1997a, p. 31), the image that comes to mind is the terror I felt as a child at the prospect of one day being sent to a reform school. Now as an adult, I am terrified at the prospect of sending children to schools that aim at reforming society. This prospect of adultified-children working hard to reform society under the guidance of childified-adults is dramatically summed up by Paul Shepard (1982) when he proposes “that the only society more frightful than one run by children, as in Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, might be one run by childish adults” (p. 17). This being said, it is also essential we strive to keep schools from falling under the spell of giant corporations selling the false bliss of “pseudocommunities” (Ehrenfeld, 1993).

Better Define, Recognize and Avoid the Perverse Effect of Exposing too Young Children to the Social and Political Stakes Associated with the Preservation of Life on Earth

A surprising phenomenon has been observed and documented. Named “ecophobia” by David Sobel (1995), it consists of a scary avoidance of the surrounding world caused by some environmental education practices. When presented with overwhelming global problems at a too young age, children gain knowledge of environmental issues but are scared of the world. Michael Soulé (1988) arrived at a similar conclusion when he explored some psychological effects of presenting the world as a set of problematic facts and environmental problems to be solved. Education for sustainable development could contribute to that ecophobia.

We must certainly pay much closer attention to our ontology and avoid pulling in children into nightmarish global issues. Instead of loving the world, the children could learn to distrust it and dislike it. The pain coming from that scare can, of course, be partly hidden by indulging in a consumer’s world—consuming ever more in order to calm the pain and the fear. Victims of such an “ecophobia,” children could very well thrive only

on purified replicates of the organic world, either in virtual representations or in aseptic theme parks and other reconstructions. One example is the increasingly popular use of artificial beaches discussed by Kimberly Dovey (1985) in *The Search for Authenticity and the Replication of Environmental Meaning*. However pathetic it may be to dwell in such replicas, Dovey notes that they nonetheless bear witness to a “search for authenticity.” They bear witness to a desire to transcend the fear, to heal the wounds, to connect with the world, and to be initiated into life’s meanings.

Here then, with “ecophobia” we have another pedagogical error of educating for sustainable development, this one possibly leading to the exact opposite of what is hoped.

Hopes

In his most recent book about education, Neil Postman (1995) examines, “Some New Gods That Fail” and “Gods That May Serve.” According to Postman, the most important new gods to have failed are what he calls; “Economic utility, Consumership, Technology and Multiculturalism” (p. 50). These are some of the gods of globalization and partly the gods of education for sustainable development. Postman goes on to describe some ideologies that may serve us better in the long run. He provides metaphors for these narratives but essentially they are about: collectively caring about our locality, humility, an openness and questioning attitude accompanied by a willingness to argue, diversity, and finally learning “how humans use language to transform the world and then, in turn, are transformed by their own invention” (p. 87). To my eyes, these maps seem much more promising than the map of education for a sustainable development.

What else could be of help? I can reiterate from the preceding analyses:

- Slow down and look attentively at the present and the past.
- Examine ideologies and lovingly resist the sales pitch of any bliss merchant.
- Be on the watch for hidden assumptions and meaning in language.
- Pay attention to dissonant experiences. Search for the adequate language to describe them, learn to share them, and if possible to embrace them.
- Care about one’s local history, its landscapes, its stories, its people, and its nature.
- Use local expertise, remain vigilant, and be wary of disembodied metanarratives.

- Go for embodied stories that resonate with one's place.
- Become more respectful of children and locate adult preoccupations and action in the corresponding sphere.
- Limit activism and commercialism in schools all the while having a loving involvement and attentiveness to the community.
- Avoid ecophobia by being attentive to diverse periods of bonding and separation. Try to provide educational experiences suited for these phases.

This kind of work is beautifully illustrated by the writing of people such as Rick Bass, Wendell Berry, John Hay, Wes Jackson, Barry Lopez, Stephanie Mills, Gary Paul Nabhan, Richard Nelson, David Orr, Robert Michael Pyle, Pattiann Rogers, Scott Russell Sanders, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, Ann Zwinger, and so many others.⁶ It is not one grand overarching metanarrative. It is scores of caring people grounded in communities.

Certainly some radical changes are called for in order that diverse human communities thrive in a thriving world. These would seem to be called for even more in the western capitalist-urban-techno-culture since it is from here that most of the damage has arisen. It would thus be sign of a minimal wisdom to think twice before applying, and exporting, our solutions to our problems on a global scale. It thus seems like there is a lot of local re-experimenting to do in order to regain some embodied experience of grounded, dedicated and placed life. This exploration is ongoing and there is exemplary educational work going on with such considerations.

So there is hope. Maybe we can heal from "disembodied globomania" when we "listen . . . and take to the heart . . . and so dwell upon the earth poetically" in Bruce Foltz (1995, p. 176) words and maybe rediscover "what is still hidden from us today by the modes of appearance of our own technological world is the event of earth and heavens as mystery" in the words of Robert Mugerauer (1995, p. 115). Neil Evernden (1992) places high hopes in people who "may help us acquire the vocabulary needed to accommodate wildness and extinguish the technological flashfire of planetary domestication" (p. 133). David Abram (1996) also tells of a search for "a more eloquent way of speaking, a style of language which by virtue of its fluidity, its carnal resonance, and its careful avoidance of abstract terms, might itself draw us into the sensuous depths of the life-world" (p. 44).

The necessary maturation to move us out of our predicament could very well mean less global thinking and some local grounding. For David Ehrenfeld (1978) some elements of this grounding are "the capacity to take pleasure in simple things," "of abjuring power," "the capacity to

acknowledge and cope with death," "the capacity to love," and "the capacity of men and women to stand alone" (p. 263-267). Thus we might rediscover and preserve some sense of a shared wildness, the beautiful ordered wildness of one's heartbeat, of one's breath, of one's being in the world.

Notes

¹ This paper is an adaptation of a much longer French text presented on June 19, 1998 at Université du Québec à Montréal. The original title would have translated: "Sustainable Future, an Untenable Development in Education: Ten Motives to Oppose it and to Defend Some Qualities of Education and of World Relations."

² The expression hypermodernity is from Charlene Spretnak (1997). She discusses some of the beliefs and ideas lying at the core of modernism and that could be pushed to their extreme by "Prometheus on the Rebound." Some elements of this hard core view of modernity are: "economism," "materialism," "industrialism," "progressivism," "objectivism," "rationalism," "reductionism," "scientism," "anthropocentrism," "instrumentalism," "centralism," "standardization," and "bureaucratization" (p. 219-220). Interestingly, Prometheus was the brother of Atlas.

³ Other examples of resistance questions pertaining to techno-fixes appear in: Berry (1995), Orr (1994), Postman (1992), and Spretnak (1997).

⁴ Carson (1956/1998), Cobb (1977), Evernden (1985, 1992), Hoffman (1992), Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), Livingston (1981, 1994), Lopez (1982), Nabhan and Trimble (1994), Shepard (1982; 1996), and Talbott (1998) all convey a sense of nature's importance in ontogeny.

⁵ Homo sapiens as a neotonic species has been discussed by Changeux (1983), Evernden (1985), Hickman, Hickman and Hickman, (1974), Morin (1973), Ruffié (1983), and Shgepard (1982). Homo sapiens sapiens as a domesticate is discusse by Livingston (1994), Shepard (1982), and by Vogel and Angenmann (1970).

⁶ There are too many works for all authors to be listed in a reference list. Good samples of their writing appear in volumes edited by Finch and Elder (1990), Halpern and Frank (1996), Sauer (1992), Servid (1995), and Vitek and Jackson (1996).

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A list of references is a way of recognizing a debt to others before us and providing some historical perspective. However, such a conventional alphabetical ordering can never provide a scale and a sense of gratitude. I wish to underline four authors and one organization that have a profound and lasting influence on my thinking, my feeling and my doing for more than ten years. They are David Ehrenfeld, Neil Evernden, John Livingston, the late Paul Shepard and the Orion Society. Their writing still provides me with the strength to trust the soundness of my own dissonance. I also wish to thank Lucie Sauvé for inviting me to come out on these issues.

Notes on Contributor

Tom Berryman finds regularly walking in the neighbourhood's urban wildlands along the railroad tracks that lie by the smokestacks of the closed down city incinerator, walking past the textile and metal industries, crossing the abandoned train yard taken over by the wild shrubs and Aspens, which frame views on a cityscape of skyscrapers, and the curved silhouette of Mount Royal, an integral part of his explorations. These experiences are joined by along with reading books, writing, and photography. For most of the past 15 years, he has worked with an environmental education centre in Mount Royal Park, part of a heritage site in the heart of Montréal, on a variety of educational, conservation and park use programs.

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