

# DO AS WE SAY, NOT AS WE DO: THE NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Environmental educationalists tend to envision schools as radical forces within an otherwise deeply problematic society. We hope, in other words, that “schools would be islands of sustainability-promotion in an ocean of unsustainable activity”.<sup>1</sup> This assumption merits consideration.

Schinkel examined this difficulty in a 2009 paper, concluding that, in the absence of more wholesale changes to underlying social structures, environmental educational efforts are unlikely to result in much change. This argument is an interesting one, and it caused us to examine environmental educational literature in a new light. If Schinkel is correct, and environmental educators are sometimes advancing proposals that would leave students in the untenable position of being “islands of sustainability,” one would expect to find in the literature a number of examples wherein scholars posited visions for environmental education that depend on coming generations being fundamentally superior to the current generation. This is exactly what one finds in reviewing recent thought on environmental education. Our expectations are, to use the technical term, *intergenerationally unjust*.<sup>2</sup>

We often begin our environmental conversations with children by instilling fear, pointing out that the environment is in severe crisis and that they must act in order to save the planet. For instance, a search for environmental educational programs and activities render titles such as “One More Generation”,<sup>3</sup> “Kids for Saving Earth”,<sup>4</sup> and “Save Our Species”.<sup>5</sup> Aside from being an arguably dubious pedagogical strategy,

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<sup>1</sup> Schinkel, Anders. Anders. Justifying Compulsory Environmental Education in Liberal Democracies. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 4 (2009): 522.

<sup>2</sup> Meyer, Lukas, “Intergenerational Justice”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/justice-intergenerational/>>.

<sup>3</sup> One More Generation. *Preservation of Our Endangered Wildlife*. Accessed May 20, 2014. <http://onemoregeneration.org>

<sup>4</sup> Kids for Saving Earth. *Environmental Education Curriculum Provided at Kids for Saving Earth (KSE)*. Accessed May 20, 2014. <http://kidsforsavingearth.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. *Save Our Species*, 2008. Accessed July 31, 2013. <http://www.epa.gov/espp/coloring/cbook.pdf>.

this is also a morally objectionable burden to place on children.<sup>6</sup> The title of these programs connote that the state of the earth, its endangered species, and humanity itself, are in the hands of our students. We use this starting point to form children into the sort of persons that can think about their decisions in light of the broadest possible scope of concern, extending far into the future and including impacts on future generations.<sup>789</sup> Johnston, for example, explains,

In 2006, when I heard that the grade 3 students at Upper Canada College would be studying a unit entitled *What a City Needs*, I saw my chance to try something I had never attempted before: teaching young children about sustainable development... I framed the integration principle of sustainable development in terms they could grasp: Is the proposed development fair to all the people involved, present and future (Social Equity)?<sup>10</sup>

While clearly a worthy goal, it is evident that the expectation being placed on the grade three students in this example dwarfs what we demand from contemporary adults. Children, it is argued, should be involved, to a far greater extent than their parents were, in environmental decision-making.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being morally superior, children are also called to exhibit superior civic dispositions. They are asked, in short, to be “super human actors for peace and progress”.<sup>12</sup> Less hyperbolically, they “must be empowered through education with the awareness, knowledge, and

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<sup>6</sup> Postma, Dirk Willem, & Smeyers, Paul. Like a Swallow, Moving Forward in Circles: On the Future Dimension of Environmental Care and Education.” *Journal of Moral Education* 41, no. 3 (2012): 399-412.

<sup>7</sup> Bourn, Douglas. “Education for sustainable Development in the UK: Making the Connections Between the Environment and Development Agendas.” *Theory and Research in Education* 6, no. 2 (2008): 193-206. doi: 10.1177/1477878508091112.

<sup>8</sup> Fien, John. Learning to Care: A Focus for Values in Health and Environmental Education.” *Health Education Research* 12, no. 4 (1997): 437-447.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, Julie. “Transformative Environmental Education: Stepping Outside the Curriculum Box.” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 14, no. 1 (2009): 149-157.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, “Transformative Environmental Education,” 155.

<sup>11</sup> Barrat Hacking, Elisabeth, Barratt, Robert & Scott, William. “Engaging Children: Research Issues Around Participation and Environmental Learning.” *Environmental Education Research* 13, no. 4 (2007): 529 -544. DOI: 10.1080/13504620701600271.

<sup>12</sup> Adara, Olusola A. “Strategies of Environmental Education in Social Studies in Nigeria by the Year 2000. *Environmental Education Research* 2, no. 2 (1996): 237.

trust that they can become agents of change to build healthier and more peaceful communities”.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that the expectations we have for the next generation drastically exceed the expectations we have for ourselves as teachers - or for our adult co-citizens. Even Bell, whose excellent analysis is explicitly focused on concerns of justice for coming generations, limits his vision to advocating that we instill in our children morally and politically superior dispositions.<sup>14</sup> No argument is posed in his discussion about teachers themselves. Searches for the terms “adult,” “teacher,” and “educator” in his article return a single result - one instance when Bell imagines what students will be like when they are themselves grown up.

In instances wherein educators’ roles *are* defined by environmental curricula, far less is asked of them than of students. The Ontario Ministry of Education, for example, instructs teachers “to develop the knowledge, and perspectives...to help students understand complex environmental issues and guide them towards environmental literacy.”<sup>15</sup> Environmental Education Ontario also developed a guide for sustainability education. In this case, teachers are expected to:

- acquire a sound understanding of ecological concepts, principles, and issues;
- teach effectively to provide students with a sound understanding of and ability to apply ecological concepts; and
- guide students to become environmentally knowledgeable, ethical, responsible, and literate citizens.<sup>16</sup>

Students, on the other hand, are expected to:

- understand the value of the natural environment
- acquire the knowledge and skills required for sustainable living and working; and

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<sup>13</sup> Bajaj, Monisha, & Chiu, Belinda. “Education for Sustainable Development as Peace Education.” *Peace & Change* 34, no. 4 (2009): 446. DOI: 10.1080/13504620701600271.

<sup>14</sup> Bell, Derek R. “Creating Green Citizens? Political Liberalism and Environmental Education.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no.1 (2004): 37-54.

<sup>15</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow*, 2009. Accessed August 12, 2013: 1. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/curriculumcouncil/shapetomorrow.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Environmental Education Ontario. *Greening the Way Ontario Learns: A Public Strategic Plan for Environmental and Sustainability Education*, 2003. Accessed July 28, 2013: 88-89. <http://www.eeon.org/plan/pdf/greening-complete.pdf>.

- become informed decision-makers who are able to incorporate environmental thinking and values into their decisions and actions.<sup>17</sup>

No environmental educational policies we have encountered require educators to achieve the same standards as the children in their care. Even when teachers are instructed to be environmental models, they are required to do so only in the confines of the classroom and school.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in the rare occasions on which other adult citizens are mentioned, they are merely noted as an audience for our “super human” environmental actors. Learners are probed to “‘teach’ others about what they’ve learned and become ‘ambassadors’ for their family and friends”.<sup>19</sup>

It is for these reasons we argue that our expectations for students (relative to teachers) need to be reconsidered. The arguments being posed in environmental education today typically do not begin with our personal behaviour or character, but with the tragedy of our mistakes. We then admonish students to become moral and civic paragons and “super human” environmental agents. This way of thinking about change is important, and we surely do not wish to demotivate collective action or support the unsustainable aspects of the status quo. That vision is, however, substantially and importantly incomplete. When we hope for our students to vastly exceed our moral and civic achievements, we do them a disservice because we are, in fact, waiting for them to rescue us from our problems. When we challenge ourselves to exceed our moral and civic boundaries, and then invite our students to take the process one step further, we show them what radical change looks like and give them an opportunity to continue it.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> David Suzuki Foundation. *The Nature Challenge Teacher’s Guide: A Comprehensive Curriculum Resource for Grades 4 to 7*, 2006. Accessed July 16, 2013: 20. <http://www.davidsuzuki.org/publications/downloads/2006/nature-challenge-teachers-guide.pdf>