

Environmental Justice and Cultural History

Three Urban Teachers' EE Practice within a Common District Jeanine Huss Western Kentucky University

Abstract

This presentation focused on three urban teachers' environmental education practices within the same district and the issues these teachers confronted daily. Teaching in an urban setting presents unique issues such as: (1) the ethnicity and cultural heritage of urban teachers as compared to their students; (2) resistance to change from administrators, other teachers, and students; (3) the educational philosophies of teachers and administrators; (4) social justice issues within the urban community; and (5) the myth regarding African-Americans' environmental attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

The researcher interviewed and observed three teachers within the same city school system in a Midwestern state. The researcher wanted to learn more about teaching environmental education within an urban setting. The overarching question that drove this case study was, "What is the nature of the gap between environmental education theory and environmental education practice?" To address this overarching question, the study sought answers to three specific research questions:

1. What are three urban teachers' personal environmental beliefs?
2. How do three urban teachers' environmental beliefs affect their understandings of environmental education?
3. How are three urban teachers' environmental education beliefs related to teaching EE in their classrooms?

TEACHERS' ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Teachers, most of whom are white (87%) (Kauchak and Eggen, 2005) instruct their students in settings unfamiliar to their own K-12 and preservice experiences. M. Cochran-Smith (2004) cites 2000 Census data stating 86% of all teachers are white and 40% of all students are minority. In many urban areas, the proportion of minority students may be as large as 90% (Darling-Hammon and Sclan, 1996). There is a disparity of per pupil spending (Kozol, 2005; Shapiro and Pupel, 2005).

RESISTANCE

Educational settings enable resistance (Eisner, E.W., 1998; Marzano, R.J., Waters, B.A. and McNulty, B.A., 2005). I felt this resistance when my students and me planted a native flower garden in front of the school and made stained glass stepping stones for the garden. Administrators, fellow teachers, and even the head custodian challenged my ideas of constructivist and environmental education teaching. I wondered how other teachers I met in the district/state/nation successfully taught EE. Did they face similar constraints? How did these teachers overcome them?

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Including EE in the curricula prompts changes in the classroom (Orr, 1994; Archie, 2001). EE can be used to address current reform issues. Environmental education (EE) uses an integrated, constructivist approach to teaching, aligning with the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards used by several colleges of education, as well as the *National Science Education Standards* (NSES) and the *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*. The national science and math standards provide a framework for alignment in governing principles and

theories in mathematics and science education in the United States. EE can be instrumental in both achieving standards and using pedagogical practices which promote student understanding (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).

Secondly, EE fits the current pedagogies most commonly encouraged in science and mathematics classrooms. Environmental education naturally links with science education (Simmons, D. 1995; 1996b; Farmer 1998; Dillon 2002; Davis 2000; Gough 2002; Moore and Huber 2001). Constructivist learning presents challenges for newly hired teachers, who face additional constraints and preconceived notions of urban settings (Corbett et al. 2002; Corbett and Wislon, 2001; Kozol 2005). These constraints may limit the amount of environmental education taught until new teachers establish proper classroom management and teaching techniques.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Polluted environments and hazards in the workplace most often threaten urban and rural minority and poor populations. Urban children, often minority students, live in the most degraded environments yet know the least about the environment (Bryant and Mohair, 1992; Bullard, 1990). Urban schools with high minority student populations should be engaged in learning environmental education because they are most at-risk of environmental hazards and need to understand potential risks/hazards associated with environmental issues.

THE MYTH OF APATHY

Kahn and Friedman (1996) interviewed African American parents in Houston to learn these parents' environmental beliefs. Parents spoke of the importance of animals, plants, and clean air in their community. Pollution of local air and water and the amount of garbage concerned parents the most. Parents favored conservation over technology to help fix environmental issues within their community. One parents from the study stated, "Nature is natural and with all this high tech we have going on now, it's not really guaranteed" (Kahn and Friedman, 1996, p. 8). Parents mentioned lack of transportation and/or safety issues as primary reasons for infrequent park visitations. Drug and environmental education received equally high rankings in importance from parents, asserting physical issues and aesthetic issues are of equal importance. Another parent said, "With drugs, we're nothing. Without the environment, we're nothing...With the drugs, you're not going to have a future and without any environment, we're not going to have a future" (Kahn and Friedman, 1996, p. 10).

Wals (1992) noted environmental education rarely occurred in the most at-risk settings, which promotes a narrowed agenda for environmental education because only those students with extended resources (typically suburban or private schools) experienced EE. In order for environmental education to promote social change, those with fewer resources and those students directly affected by degraded environments should be included in the discussion. Children, in the study by Kahn and Friedman (1993), listed animals, plants, and parks as their top interests in nature. Even with their interests in nature, children still held naïve concepts about nature. Thirty-six percent of children understood air pollution, but did not recognize air pollution issues occurring locally. Another study showed students felt the burden of environmental problems,

causing anxiety related to their ability to promote societal change (Cross, 1998). This anxiety led to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness for which Wals (1992) urged researchers to find counteracting stories.

Dispelling the myth of African Americans' non-concern for the environment also is important. Past reasons for this non-concern included the reasoning that hierarchy of needs must come first before concern of the environment. Others reasoned it could be because of cultural differences. Still others blamed it on "environmental deprivation" because of the large population of African Americans who live in urban environments. These reasons, however, do not match reality. African Americans show an equal concern for the overall environment and greater concern for local environments than Caucasians (Mohai & Bryant, 1998; Sheppard, 1995).

DEFINING ENVIRONMENT TO BE INCLUSIVE

Dorceta Taylor (1996), an African American female researcher, criticized Transcendentalism's definition of the environment as narrow. The notion of the environment developed during this period revolved around the idea of "untrammelled wilderness" (Nash, 1967) which excluded urban settings. Untrammelled implied never touched by humans; land left in its original form. The untrammelled environment ignored connections between issues of class, gender, race, and social justice and the environment. De Grazia added a reason to expand the definition of wilderness, "Only if you give the city a pleasant and healthful outdoor environment, can you slacken the expensive, wasteful and self-destructing drive for the wilderness. Only the city can save the wilderness" (as cited in Hendee et al. 1990, p. 22).

More modern definitions of the environment add inclusivity. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) define nature as “parks, open spaces, meadows, abandoned fields, street trees, and backyard gardens which includes human-designed, trammed land as well as natural, untrammed land” (p. 2). Natural environments include urban, rural, and suburban areas (Kahn & Friedman 1993 and 1996; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

EE IS AT THE KNOWLEDGE/ATTITUDES LEVEL

It [EE] has been subjected to incorporation within the existing hegemony in a neutralized form--the radical ‘action’ components having been deleted and the less controversial cognitive and skill ones retained, together with the name ‘environmental education.’ It is then claimed that the program is environmental education, although only some of the characteristic objectives of environmental education are included. (Greenall, 1981a, p. 292, as cited in Fien, 1993)

NEETF 1994 SURVEY WITH SUBSAMPLE OF URBAN STUDENTS

The National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF) surveyed 2,139 disadvantaged youth to find out their concerns. Rockland (1995) reported students cited AIDS as their primary issue which affected them and environmental problems as second. In urban students, AIDS ranked first, the economy second, and the environment eighth out of ten issues. 74% of students said they learned about the environment from television, with only 30% citing schools. Grades 4-5 had the most environmental knowledge, with high school students reporting the least knowledge. Urban students ranked the importance of clean drinking water, lead poisoning, acid rain and energy shortages higher than other students. Urban students show an overall concern

for human health in relation to the environment and more concern for solving immediate environmental problems (p. 12-13).

LEARNING LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS

For environmental education to become inclusive, we must listen to people like Dorceta Taylor. Dr. Taylor (1996) would like students to learn from their local environments and worries about learning which is disconnected from where students live. “An educational program that forces them to disconnect themselves from that [immediate] environment will fail” (Taylor, 1996, p.3). Teach local issues to interest students, then other environments and experiences. Taylor (1996) would like a multicultural perspective of environmental education taught. Because environmental education arose from nature studies, a white middle-class perspective marginalizes other races, cultures, and genders. “...people of color insist that they, like other human beings, should be considered part of the environment. People of color also insist that their communities be included—be they reservations, agricultural fields, urban centers, or the rural hinterlands” (Taylor, 1996, p. 4).

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