



Viewpoint

Responding to Destructive Interpersonal Interactions: A way forward for school-based environmental educators

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Abstract

This viewpoint paper focusses on the interpersonal problems that result in an unhealthy/unsafe school environment. Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, the prevalence of domestic violence, child abuse, sexism, cultural intolerance and other destructive interpersonal interactions and relationships clearly indicate an unsustainable society; one that prevents complete health amongst its members. Of further concern is the fact that these issues have not only been shown to have a marked negative impact on the ability of young people to learn but also to engage meaningfully with peers in the classroom/school environment. This paper highlights the need for dialogue and reflection around the emotions that are often evoked by the above issues. It also argues the need for whole-school structures and procedures as crucial aspects of any response to these problems. In this regard, it suggests that the values promoted by many of the SADC states might serve as a foundation for the development of such a response.

Introduction

This viewpoint paper discusses an holistic approach that schools might take towards the creation of a healthy and safe environment. Specific attention is given to the development of whole-school structures and procedures as a response to destructive interpersonal interactions¹ within the local environment. This paper draws on the experiences and research of educators in southern Africa and abroad, particularly within the UK. It attempts to open up for debate the possibility of involving learners and colleagues in whole-school processes that will foster constructive interpersonal relationships, viewed here as prerequisites for a sustainable lifestyle and for sustainable development in general.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development suggests the need for educational processes that will achieve the overarching goal of enabling all people to live sustainably within healthy and safe environments.² For a variety of reasons, as outlined below, I believe that constructive interpersonal relationships are an essential component of such healthy and safe environments and, therefore, should be given due attention by environmental educators.

Common Problems Experienced in the Local Environment: Some Causes and Effects

The environmental concerns which currently serve as a common focus for school-based environmental education processes include those that have a negative impact on the local natural resources and that result in an unhealthy biophysical environment. Such problems include water and/or air pollution, the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion and poor waste management, amongst others. Beyond such problems, however, what commonly makes the local environment especially unhealthy and unsafe are destructive interpersonal relationships, including child abuse and neglect, emotional abuse, physical violence, prejudice and discrimination, and a general disregard for the rights of others. These issues operate in vicious cycles and are evidenced in the destructive interactions and relationships that often exist in the school environment, between learners themselves and between learners and their educators. These interactions include fighting, swearing and bad language, and little or no respect for others, etc. Such confrontational, disruptive and destructive behaviour in general, continues the destructive cycles of anxiety, fear, anger and disaffection.

Just as the problems involving the biophysical environment have their root causes in political, economic and social structures, processes and systems of the past and of the present, so too do the issues mentioned above. These issues are clearly situated in the cultural and social history – the social patterns and the social habitus – of each and every social group. However, these interpersonal relationship problems are not only linked to social circumstance but are also closely linked to intrapersonal factors (Johnson, 2003); a person's self-awareness/self-concept and self-esteem. This 'intrapersonal relationship', in turn, impacts hugely upon a person's ability to express emotions and feelings, especially difficult ones, such that constructive interpersonal relationships are built and maintained (Johnson, 2003). This would strongly suggest that healthy and (emotionally) safe school and classroom environments, where learners and educators constructively express difficult emotions and are still accepted, are crucial for the emotional, spiritual and physical health of individuals.

Destructive Interpersonal Relationships in the School Environment

A question that is currently being asked, relates to whether any of the above-mentioned interpersonal relationship-related issues link to the biophysical dimension of environment and, thus, whether educators should give attention to such issues within their environmental teaching and learning interactions. I believe that the answer is 'yes', for at least three reasons. Firstly, research has shown that a person's current emotional state often blocks the way to working with others in learning situations (Antidote, 2003)³. This is particularly problematic when one considers that cooperative and/or collaborative learning processes are widely acknowledged as being central to enabling meaningful socio-ecological change (Janse van Rensburg & Taylor, 1993). Secondly, these issues appear to have a marked negative impact on the ability of young people to learn in general. And, thirdly, the above problems, evident in our schools and surrounding neighbourhoods, are undoubtedly impacting upon the quality of life of many individuals, both young and old.

Many learners and educators regularly experience anxiety-inducing situations and/or struggle with personal trauma and, consequently, are unable to engage meaningfully with classmates and/or educators in cooperative learning activities. In this regard, research conducted by Antidote (2003) suggests that it is difficult emotions in general that not only generate disaffection but also constrict learning. The ability to communicate and be flexible and tolerant is enormously reduced among people who have unresolved personal traumas (Cabrera, 2003). Such traumas may be as the result of any or all of the relationship problems listed above, and may also include such 'minor' interpersonal confrontations such as a heated 'tea-break' argument, or a disagreement at home, or even a put-down from a teacher.

Responding to Destructive Interpersonal Relationships in the School Context

Numerous educational organisations⁴ (mostly outside of Southern Africa) are finding that destructive interpersonal interactions, inside and out of school, and the difficult emotions that they often evoke, provide opportunities in class for meaningful interactions and learning and for enabling learners to acknowledge their feelings and express and reflect on them individually and collectively. Such educational processes do not appear to require the mediation of trained counsellors but may, in fact, be facilitated through the development of whole-school structures and processes.

The above processes relate closely to the provision of opportunities for learners to reflect on how they feel about (and do) things, which has been in good education, often most notable in 'life skills' curriculum activities, for some time. In general, however, the interplay that appears to occur between the emotions and cognitive factors is not given explicit attention within the teaching and learning interactions that play out in schools. In particular, learners (and educators) rarely seem to be involved in actively thinking about, and discussing, how emotions, elicited by one or the other (destructive) interaction, shape one's actions and behaviour within relationships. Without this, the development of an understanding of one's own emotions and those of others and then of finding a way of allowing this understanding to inform one's actions is retarded.

What seems necessary, are structures agreed upon by the whole-school community that enable the active engagement of learners and educators in dialogue and reflection with a focus on the issue at hand and, in particular, on the emotions and the way in which they influence one's actions within relationships. The creation of such responsive schools and classrooms, where learners and educators constructively express difficult emotions and are still accepted and valued (especially those affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic) suggests that these structures might most usefully be incorporated within a formal school policy. In South Africa, for example, such a policy,⁵ developed by the whole-school community, might focus on using the values outlined within the Constitution to serve as a useful framework for ensuring the constructive expression of emotions and the maintenance of caring relationships. A 'values climate' such as this would serve to support and nurture constructive intrapersonal relationships as well as constructive interpersonal relationships in every classroom across the curriculum on an ongoing basis.

The development of a school policy that focusses on values, as described above, makes sense in light of the interpersonal relationship problems previously highlighted. Many of the SADC states, including South Africa,⁶ and various current international initiatives,⁷ highlight the following fundamental values: democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, an open society, accountability (responsibility), the rule of law, respect and reconciliation.

These, and other values, such as compassion, tolerance, trust, empathy and peace, are what have been termed character-building (Lourens, 2004); values that might guide educators' and learners' ethical behaviour within relationships and when interacting with others. In this regard, it seems clear that fundamental to democratic processes (within schools) are the values of caring and respect for and between learners and teachers (Pennock, 1993).

Concluding Comments

In essence, it is the creation of diverse opportunities for everyone within the school community to engage with each other around interpersonal/social issues in ways that enable the appreciation of other's thoughts and feelings that is of importance. In such a school, feelings of anxiety and frustration, etc. still have the power to disrupt the processes of teaching and learning, but when they do, the emotions are acknowledged, talked about, dealt with and learned from. Not only is meaningful learning enabled, but learners' capacity to interact and to work cooperatively and with respect for others is increased. Such engagement may be best served by a school policy that pays overt attention to the quality of interpersonal relationships within the whole-school community. The values that are agreed upon by the whole-school community (and in South Africa, outlined in the Constitution) would appear to form an appropriate framework within which to develop and implement such a school policy.

Although environmental education processes of active learning have come to be viewed by many as being central to good education, such processes have not, in general, included a focus on interpersonal problems nor provided explicit opportunities for learners to express difficult emotions constructively. I believe that the involvement of learners in dialogue and reflection around difficult feelings needs to be seen as integral to environmental education processes/good education and to enabling learners to play a role in the creation of a healthy and (emotionally) safe environment. As with environmental teaching and learning, the involvement of learners in the above processes is not something that can be confined to any particular learning area or group in the school. These processes might be most effective when viewed as fundamental to all school interactions, permeating what goes on in the staffroom, the classroom, the playground, as well as affecting how the school interacts with the wider community. A school policy that is negotiated, developed and implemented by the whole-school community might be an effective way to enable this.

Notes on the Contributor

Alistair Chadwick has an MSc in Environmental Science from Lund University in Sweden and an MEd in Adult Education from the University of KZN. He has recently embarked on a BSc Honours degree in psychology. Chadwick has been in the field of environmental education for over a decade and has been with the SADC Regional Environmental Education Programme (REEP) since October 2000. He provides technical support to environmental education practitioners from around the region and develops a wide range of course curricula and professional development programmes. Email: alistair@futurenet.co.za.

Endnotes

- 1 The phrases 'interpersonal interactions' and 'interpersonal relationships' are used interchangeably throughout the text.
- 2 A healthy and safe environment may be viewed as one that sustains a person's emotional, spiritual and physical health.
- 3 Antidote (2003) is a UK-based educational project that focusses on emotional literacy in schools.
- 4 These organisations include the Bristol Education Action Zone, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (Payton *et al.*, 2000) and the National Emotional Literacy Interest Group (NELIG) amongst others.
- 5 A policy process that follows the recommendations outlined within the Schools and Sustainability pack (Share-Net) involves learners, educators and other school staff, and parents in the deliberation, development and implementation of the policy, to ensure the creation and sustaining of a healthy school environment such that environmental learning takes place throughout the school curriculum.
- 6 In South Africa, the government-led 'Values and Human Rights in Education Initiative' has identified 16 'steps' for educators to take in order to ensure that these values become embedded within the school curriculum and, ultimately, a part of everyone's daily living.
- 7 The Earth Charter is one such initiative, described as a 'declaration of fundamental principles for building a... sustainable... society in the 21st century.' It focusses attention on the promotion of a range of values, including social justice and human rights as a means to ensuring a sustainable society. It emphasises the widespread problems of 'injustice, poverty, ignorance and violent conflict', and stresses the need for 'a culture of peace'. Importantly, the Earth Charter recognises that 'environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace are all interdependent and indivisible'.

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