



Viewpoint

Environmental Justice: Order-words and pass-words

Lesley le Grange, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Abstract

Environmental justice, along with constructs such as environmental rights, has gained prominence in environmental discourse over the last three decades. These constructs have also migrated into education discourses including education policies. In South Africa environmental justice is a component of one of the key principles supporting South Africa's recently implemented National Curriculum Statement. Despite these developments, there is still uncertainty as to what environmental justice means. Vincent (1998) analyses the term and concludes that it is a double category error since it does not rest well with either environmental theory or justice theory. I suggest that the angle of vision should shift from a focus on what environmental justice means to a focus on what it does and what it produces.

Introduction

Conceptions of environmental education have and continue to change. Changing conceptions of environmental education reflect pendulum swings from anthropocentric to ecocentric orientations to human-nature relationships. The concept 'environment' itself has expanded from a narrow reference to only the biophysical dimension to one that includes interacting economic, political and social dimensions. In recent years we have witnessed the (re)emergence of environmental (education) discourses that appear to have strong anthropocentric leanings. I refer here to notions such as environmental rights (a subset of human rights) and environmental justice (a subcategory of justice theory generally or social justice thought more specifically). As can be seen in South Africa's new national curriculum frameworks, for example, these constructs have migrated into educational discourses. One of the nine principles underpinning the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Further Education and Training (FET) in South Africa is: 'human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice' (DoE, 2003). Although formulated as one principle, four related but distinct constructs could be identified. The elaboration of this principle reads as follows:

The National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General) seeks to promote human rights, social justice and environmental justice. All newly-developed Subject Statements are infused with the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. In particular

the National Curriculum Statement Grades 10–12 (General) is sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors. (DoE, 2003:4)

By implication, environmental justice should therefore form part of the discursive terrains of all school subjects in South Africa. Flowing from this, we might ask how the term is understood by those with a vested interest in South African education and what the term means. The first part of the question is an empirical one and the second part a conceptual one. This complex question (the latter part in particular) has received considerable attention in environmental philosophy literature over the past two decades. Vincent (1998) is one of those who argue that environmental justice is a category error. In his view, environmental justice is a double category error because it sits awkwardly with both environmental theory (which is by and large ecocentric) and justice theory (which is anthropocentric). My interest here is not to take this discussion further, but rather to shift the angle of vision from what environmental justice *means* to what it *does* or *produces* in specific locations and the implications for education. By way of background I briefly describe the term environmental justice.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice might in the first instance be described as a movement. As Faber and McCarthy (2003:45) write: 'It's a movement – a new wave of grassroots activism consisting of hundreds of community-based organisations working to reverse the ecological and economic burdens borne by people of colour and poor-working-class families'. Put differently, the environmental justice movement is concerned with addressing the unjust way in which environmental benefits and burdens (including problems and risks) are distributed across both global and local societies. Moreover, it also promotes broader participation (to include women and people of colour) in determining how benefits and burdens are distributed. Independent movements comprising the broader movement are:

1. the civil rights movement as led by African-Americans and other disenfranchised people of colour;
2. the occupational health and safety movement, particularly that wing devoted to protecting non-union immigrants and undocumented workers;
3. the indigenous land rights movement, particularly that wing devoted to the cultural survival and sovereignty of Native peoples;
4. the public health and safety movement, particularly that wing devoted to tackling issues of lead poisoning and toxics;
5. the solidarity movement for promoting human rights and the self-determination of developing world peoples; and
6. the social/economic justice movement involved in multi-grade grass-roots organising in oppressed communities of colour and poor working-class neighbourhoods.'

(Faber & McCarthy, 2003:45–46)

But the broader movement has also reached the point where environmental justice can be viewed as a set of clearly articulated principles. Seventeen principles were formulated at the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit that was held in 1991. These wide-ranging principles include matters such as: affirming the sacredness of Mother Earth, mutual respect for all peoples, the fundamental right to self-determination, the rights of workers to a safe and healthy working environment, the enforcement of principles of informed consent, opposing military occupation, and so on (see Merchant [1994:371–372] for full description of the 17 principles). We may judge each of the 17 principles as having merit in its own right. We may also see conceptual links among certain of the principles.

But what constitutes instances of environmental injustice? In the United States the government bought out the properties of the Love Canal community in 1979 after leaking barrels of dioxin were found beneath their homes. A year later, Craver Terrace, an African-American suburb in Texarkana, Texas, was polluted by creosote (a known carcinogen) that was used by a company (Koppers) for 50 years to coat railroad ties. When the company closed their operation they simply bulldozed their facilities and covered them with soil. Plots there were sold cheaply to eager poor communities. When the community first complained about dark patches of ‘gunk’ seeping through their lawns and cracks in the streets, three environmental impact assessments (EPAs) were conducted: two reported that the site posed an immediate health hazard and the third said that there was no immediate danger to the community. The community was told about the findings of the third EPA but were not informed that the other two EPAs had been conducted and what their findings were. Patsy Ruth Oliver took up the Texarkana community’s case and argued that the only reason the community was treated differently from the Love Canal community was that the residents were poor and mainly African-American. She forced the government to buy out the properties of the Carver Terrace community and the toxic waste dumps were cleaned up with funds from a trust that the United States Congress established in 1980 (for detail see Shrader-Frechette, 2002).

Another instance is the following: A survey conducted in South Africa in 1994/1995 showed that respiratory illnesses resulting from air pollution were seven times higher among black children living in the former Eastern Transvaal than European children (SAIRR, 1995). The children live in informal settlements where cheap domestic fuels such as wood and coal are the main source of energy. They are therefore exposed to air pollutants as a consequence of their poor living conditions. The children also live near industrial areas and mine dumps and so are also exposed to industrial pollutants. They live close to mines and other industrial areas because their parents offer cheap labour to these industries. One of the pillars of apartheid policies was the Group Areas Act, which determined that different racial groups, black, Coloured, Indian and white, had to live in separate residential areas. The upshot of this was that poor communities (mainly African and to a lesser degree Coloured and Indian communities) were located in areas that made them vulnerable, not only because of poor living conditions, but also because of exposure to industrial pollutants.

Environmental Justice – An Order-Word

Deleuze and Guattari (1994) argue that philosophy is not about clarifying concepts, but about creating concepts. These conceptual creations they call *mots d'ordre*, 'order-words'. They write:

We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a 'social obligation'. Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. The only possible definition of language is the set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at a given time. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987:79)

I would like to suggest that environmental justice be viewed as an order-word. Gough (2004) argues that when we view concepts as order-words then the focus shifts from what a concept *means* to what it *does* or *produces* in specific locations. Environmental justice is a term that has produced a new social order and social obligations and imperatives. Globally the environmental justice movement forms part of a rhizome of new social movements that offer resistance to globalisation and the agendas of supranational organisations and multinational corporations. The environmental justice movement mobilises local communities to change their living conditions and to make governments realise their obligations to all citizens. But what is the promise of environmental justice in a post-apartheid order?

Any account of environmental justice in South Africa will inevitably make reference to the dominant environmental ideology during the apartheid era – 'characterised by a wildlife-centred, preservationist approach which appealed mainly to the affluent, educated, and largely white minority' (Khan, 2002:15). For many Black South Africans the environmental movement in South Africa was elitist and peripheral to their struggle against apartheid and for a better life. In the 1970s and 1980s the dominant environmental ideology was reflected only in ecology sections of school subjects such as biology and geography. A broader understanding of the multi-dimensional (biophysical, economic, political and social) nature of environment was not reflected in the intended curriculum for South African schools during the apartheid era. Environmental ideology during apartheid produced a conservationist order that alienated the majority of South Africans – it produced resistance to engagement with environmental-related matters.

However, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of political organisations in 1990 produced a new environmental order. Khan (2002) argues that this period not only created political space to broaden horizons beyond anti-apartheid politics but also produced a more flexible and relaxed political climate that gave impetus to the dissolution of strict boundaries between politics and conservation. Organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) all placed environmental

issues on their agendas. In this period, environmental justice was invoked by community-based organisations (CBOs) and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Khan (2002:32) points out that the focus of these organisations was on 'brown issues' (basic needs) rather than on 'green issues'. This new environmental movement grew into a national environmental coalition, and in 1993 the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF) was formed. Khan (2002) notes that the EJNF now comprises 600 organisations. It is evident that in South Africa the concept environmental justice has produced a rhizome of organisations within the EJNF, and this forum has played a role in assisting poor urban and rural communities in addressing disparate needs, and has also been active in influencing government to take environmental justice principles on board (Khan, 2002).

Although the environmental movement grew in the early 1990s it remained a movement of the margins – it was concerned with the basic needs of the poor. However, South Africa's first democratic elections saw environmental concerns migrating into mainstream discourses, largely because those who were at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid now were in government. As a result, the right to a clean, safe and healthy environment, for example, is enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution. Many other policies produced by the South African government have been derived from the Constitution. The key principles which underpin the National Curriculum Statements for General Education and Training (GET) and FET are, for example, derived from the South African Constitution. The inclusion of environmental justice into one of these key principles of the national curriculum statements should be understood in this context.

The mainstreaming of environmental concerns can produce several effects. One effect is that people suffering as a consequence of environmental injustices now have legal recourse. One demonstration of this is the action taken by the Treatment Action Campaign (a South African AIDS activist organisation) which mounted and won a legal case against the government. The judgement obliged the government to make antiretroviral drugs available to pregnant mothers in all nine provinces in order to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. On the other hand, the mainstreaming of environmental concerns may have weakened grassroots environmental organisations and therefore thwarted efforts to fight against environmental injustices – since 1994 we have only witnessed few isolated cases of environmental activism in South Africa. Furthermore, the migration of environmental concerns into mainstream discourses could shift the focus of the environmental movement (and environmental education) in South Africa to one that is strongly anthropocentric, given that environmental rights and justice discourses are unrepentantly anthropocentric. A pendulum swing too far in the anthropocentric direction could be as dangerous as a narrow focus on 'green issues' only. But, what does all of this have to do with education?

Some Implications for Education in South Africa

The inclusion of environmental justice as a component of one of the key principles of South Africa's curriculum statements implies that it will form part of the discursive terrains of all learning areas and school subjects. Opportunities therefore exist for including locally relevant

examples of environmental (in)justices and bringing these to bear on learning programmes of (or across) different school subjects. If harnessed in meaningful ways, these opportunities could have transformative effects for teaching and learning in all school subjects.

The strong emphasis on environmental justice, human rights and inclusivity is understandable given South Africa's apartheid history. However, the inclusion of environmental justice as an underlying principle of South Africa's national curriculum statements also frames environmental education in a particular way; there certainly is an anthropocentric turn or return evident here. In South African education policies environmental justice is an order-word, commanding teachers and learners to obey an anthropocentric directive. As mentioned, narrow ecocentric or anthropocentric perspectives are not helpful in addressing complex environmental problems/issues. So is there an escape from a new anthropocentric order? Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that beneath order-words there are pass-words. Concerning the latter, Gatens (1997: 182) writes:

Pass-words 'transform the composition of order into components of passage'. The pass-word is a 'line of flight' that transforms the plane of organisation by acting creatively rather than reacting to the command embedded in language. Creation displaces the command function of language, it expresses a new action, it calls upon the 'commander' to react or flee because it shows his world as one possible world rather than *the* world.

In this context, Honan (2004) argues that teachers do not simply obey policy commands; they analyse policies rhizomatically. She argues that rhizo-textual analysis of the relations between teachers and texts disrupts a commonplace understanding about these relationships that currently inform much of the work done by policy-makers and policy analysts. Teachers engage rhizomatically with policy texts such as national curriculum statements: some acquiesce, some resist, some subvert, and so on. Creative teachers might think of indigenous knowledge (also one of the principles of South Africa's curriculum statements) as a pass-word and invoke indigenous stories in pedagogical episodes that could expand the notion of justice to the realm of non-human nature, and by doing so disrupt/transform the anthropocentrism of commonly held views on environmental justice.

Notes on the Contributor

Lesley le Grange is professor and Vice-Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University. He teaches and researches in the fields of environmental education, research methodology, science education and curriculum and assessment. He has more than 120 publications to his credit and serves on several editorial boards of peer-reviewed journals. He is co-author of the book, *Continuous Assessment: An Introduction and Guidelines for Implementation* (published by Juta and Company) and is co-editor of the book *Imaginaries on Democratic Education and Change* (published by Stellenbosch University Publishers). Email: llg@sun.ac.za.

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