ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE

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One of the key assumptions in environmental education for sustainable development is that environmental education should improve and ultimately sustain people's 'quality of life'. The main question the paper addresses is how we can measure 'quality of life'. Earlier debates focussed on measuring quantitative factors but more recent surveys are concerned with developing a matrix of measurement that addresses qualitative factors as well in order to give a more meaningful picture of the state of well-being in a society. The problem with such a matrix is that the factors are couched in particular cultural interpretations, which tempts us to think that we cannot have an intercultural notion of human flourishing. I argue that not only can we have such a notion, but given the assumption of interdependence which underpins environmental education, we must start to spell out a shared concept of what constitutes 'quality of life'.

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To the fairly simple question of why we should teach people to care for the environment, there are different complex answers. I am not going to explore these in this paper, but will pick up on one set of response that seems to have been dominant in the last two decades.

> We need nothing more than a new global ethic - an ethic which espouses attitudes and behaviour for individuals and societies that are consonant with humanity's place in the biosphere ... It is within this context that the foundations must be laid for a world-wide environmental education programme that will make it possible to develop new knowledge and skills, values and attitudes, in a drive towards a better quality of environment and, indeed, towards a higher quality of life for the present and future generations living within that environment (UNESCO-UNEP, 1976).

> [The task of environmental education is to] improve the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems (IUCN, 1991).

> [Education for sustainable development is a process which] develops human capacity and creativity to participate in determining the future, encourage technical progress, as well as fostering the cultural conditions favouring social and economic change to improve the quality of economic growth while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems to maintain life indefinitely (IUCN, Commission on Education and Communication, 1993).

What these different responses share, in response to the question of why it is important that we teach people to care for the environment, is to link environmental education to a notion of improving the quality of the environment which, in turn, is linked to a notion of improving the quality of human life. I am going to use this as a departure point for my argument, i.e. people should be taught to care for the environment, because by caring for it, they enhance their own quality of life (be it physical, emotional, spiritual, social). My argument starts from the premise that there is a direct link between environmental education and sustaining the conditions that enhance quality of life, not only for ourselves, but also for future generations. But then the question arises: What is quality of life?

In response to this question, I want to draw a conceptual map that may help us find our path through an undergrowth of different concepts of environmental education and human flourishing. I am not going to pursue the different concepts of environmental education here, but I am going to try to clarify a framework in terms of which we can place these different interpretations of environmental education and their inherent notions of quality of life. In the drawing of a conceptual map, I am going to base my main contours on an argument of Allardt (1993). He sketches three main matrices in terms of which 'quality of life' can be measured, i.e. Having, Being/Doing and Loving. I shall link these broadly to material conditions of life, social conditions and a moral order.

To return to the first question: what does 'quality of life' mean? What are the conditions for human flourishing?

First, the matrix of **Having**. Much in the field of development studies and welfare research has been

written about how one can measure such a slippery goal. Most recent surveys that compare and measure standards of quality of life in different countries of the world, have moved away from a crude calculation of Gross National Product (GNP) and annual income *per capita*. Academic debates have shown that measuring only economic factors in determining the well-being of people is too restrictive and narrowly conceived to convey the complexity of human living and flourishing or well-being. It is argued that there are a range of additional factors that need to be taken into account in order to convey a more accurate and meaningful picture of the state of well-being in a society. The question arose, which other factors do we need to take account of in order to determine quality of life? Or put differently, what other resources should individuals possess and have access to in order to manage and direct their own lives? The matrix of having focuses on material, physical, economic, vocational and intellectual resources. These resources, it is argued, are necessary for sustaining the material conditions of life. These are environmental conditions, such as having clean air and enough food, so quality of life is directly linked to quality of the conditions of the physical environment. Environmental education in this interpretation aims to equip individuals with resources that will enable them to create or sustain these material conditions. What are these other resources then that will enable individuals to manage and direct their lives in such a way that ensures their survival and avoidance of misery?

Economic resources: e.g. money is necessary to individuals to secure their survival and determine their lives. To enjoy quality of life thus means that individuals should have goods that have economic currency (be it money or marketable skills or products for bartering).

Housing conditions: this focuses on the space available (e.g. how many people share what area of space?) as well as the number of housing amenities available.

Employment opportunities: this has to do with the availability of work, be it formal or informal, with the number of options for employment which are accessible to the individual.

Working conditions: These have to do with the level of noise and temperature, as well as the measure of stress experienced.

Health conditions: This focuses on the extent to which the individual enjoys absence of symptoms of illness and pain. It also has to do with the number of health facilities available and the extent of medical provisions and services.

Education provision: This resource is measured in terms of the extent of educational provision, number of schools available, accessibility to institutions of learning and the number of years of formal training.

Conditions of safety: These have to do with the extent to which law and order are maintained. It is often expressed in terms of crime figures, murders *per capita*, number of convictions, etc.

The above resources that contribute to quality of life are factors that can be expressed in numbers. They have to do with the number, the space, the level and the extent of resources available. In other words, quality of life on this matrix is a quantitative measure. It can be expressed in graphs, and frequency tables of GNP output, income *per capita*, school enrolment figures, average number of people per living space, life expectancy figures, etc. Although these figures are extremely useful in pointing to the extent of provisions of resources, I want to argue that they are inadequate for capturing human well-being.

The following are some of the shortcomings associated with a matrix of having in assessing quality of life. It, first of all, has an essentially aggregative character. It implies that the more we have the better; the more clinics, the more schools, the more jobs, the more money, all mean a better quality of life for humans. This may, of course, have some bearing on the quality of human lives, but I think it is fairly clear that it is a simplistic index that ignores a central consideration, i.e. the question about the quality of those resources. Not only do we need to ask, for example, how many schools are available or how many years of formal education someone has access to, but we also need to ask what is the quality of those schools, and the nature of the formal education received. So too can we ask questions about the qualitative character of housing conditions (to live alone in a big house surrounded by barbed wire and alarms in a crime-riddled area seems to me to be a less fulfiling life-style than one in which a number of loving and supportive members share a small house in a safe area); and about the qualitative character of the employment available (a particular job may pay well, may come with a big comfortable office, have little

stress, but be utterly boring); and about the qualitative character of available health services (uncaring nurses and abundance of available pills may also lead to drug dependencies); and about the qualitative nature of food available (there may be lots of food available but it may not be of a nutritious kind).

Second, the expression of quality of life in terms of numbers does not reflect patterns of distribution within the society and is silent on internal disparities. For example, a particular society may have a fairly high average income *per capita*, but such a figure may hide vast disparities between rich and poor within the society. Furthermore, it may have fairly high life expectancy rates, but this may be due to the dominance of the affluent, and silent on infant mortality rates.

Third, there is an important question that a quantitative assessment of quality of life cannot answer; the question of to what purposes the resources are put. Or put differently, in which way are the resources used? Does a society with a high GNP put its economic resources into financing sophisticated warfare? Does a society with high school enrolment figures use its schooling as a way of indoctrinating its youth? Does a society with free medical care encourage its members to become drug dependent? A society that does these may feature favourably on a quantitative scale, but we would hesitate to judge members of such a society to have quality of life, or to enjoy human flourishing.

What are the implications of this for environmental education? If, as I have claimed earlier, there is a link between environmental education and quality of life, then a quantitative assessment of quality of life would lead to a particular interpretation of environmental education. Such an interpretation of environmental education would teach learners to secure and sustain the material conditions of their environment. It would teach learners the skills necessary for lucrative employment, would teach basic health care such as hygiene, and would encourage learners to extract maximum use of resources, e.g. by encouraging recycling. However, the problems of a quantitative assessment of human flourishing are also attendant in such an interpretation of environmental education. The main problem that I want to pick up on here is that such an interpretation is based on an essentially individualistic notion of human flourishing. The emphasis of environmental education is on securing and sustaining the material conditions for one's own flourishing. Although this is of course important, it

leaves out of focus the social context that gives our own individual lives meaning and significance. I want to argue that it is only against a social background of meaning that our own lives can be interpreted. The above is a brief argument for my claim that what we thus need to bring into the assessment of quality of life is a notion of qualitative assessment and a notion of social context. The implications for environmental education are that teachers must enable learners to make judgments about the social purposes and uses of material resources.

The second matrix of **Being/Doing** in assessing quality of life goes some way towards picking up on the qualitative and social dimensions of human flourishing. It implies that we cannot flourish in isolation from others. The quality of our social interactions impact directly on the quality of our own lives. What then are the indices by which we can assess the social dimension of our quality of life? The following are some suggestions:

Attachments and contacts in the local community: Although the notion of a 'global community' is something that is strengthened by the development of mass media, of mass migration patterns and the notion of global environmental interdependence, the space and time in which we actually live out our lives is in a specific habitus.

Attachments to family and kin: Who we are is influenced by the family context in which we grew up, the bonds between family members. Although in some cultures family commitments and attachments are much stronger than in others, we still recognise that some attachment to family and kin gives us depth to our lives. Of course, the quality of the family attachments is importance here, not just their extent.

Active patterns of friendship: This notion of friendship is an organic one that relies on active participation, mutual support, nurturing and commitment. Friendships are formed not given, and as such our quality of life is enhanced by friendships that have these qualities.

Attachments with fellow members in association and organisation: Modern life has added a number of dimensions to the contexts in which we live out our lives - but we also spend time in association with others who share our interests. These attachments need not be with members of the local community only; the phenomenal growth of

the Internet attests to the variety of sites of interests that cohere participants from all over the world.

Relationships with work-mates: A significant part of our lives are lived out in our work environment. Supportive and helpful colleagues contribute significantly to our self-growth.

What this matrix highlights is the importance of our social attachments. But rather than focussing only on the extent of these social commitments, they also try to articulate the qualitative nature of these social attachments. So what is added to this assessment of quality of life is the assessment of what we do in addition to what we have. And what we do and have impact on what we are. Before I look briefly at the implications of this for environmental education, I want to pick up on two problems with this index of human flourishing.

First, an interesting comparison between the matrix of being/doing and that of having as sketched above, has shown that there is a zero correlation between the strength of solidarity in social relations and that of the material conditions of living. A person living in a cramped house with little food may have strong social commitments to family and friends and enjoy a sense of social support and solidarity, whereas a person living in a comfortable house with lots of food may suffer from loneliness of soul. Of course, if material conditions become so bad that they threaten actual life, bonds of solidarity may break down. The problem that I want to note here is that because of the contingent rather than conceptual link between these two matrices of quality of life, a person's quality of life may be judged to be full on one index and low on another. Can we thus say anything about the overall quality of that person's life?

The second and more substantial problem is the way in which the matrix of being/doing can be 'measured'. One way in which to do this is in terms of a 'thick' description, i.e. a description that appeals to adjectives and adverbs. So we can say that a person's friendships are 'enriching' and 'supportive', that her relationships with work colleagues are 'constructive' and that she 'actively' participates in developing social associations. But this brings another problem to the fore. The meanings we attach to these adjectives and adverbs differ. What I might understand under 'supportive' may differ from how another interprets it. Language does not have 'fixed' meanings, but I want to claim that this does not mean that

therefore 'anything goes'. There are parameters of meaning which have been developed over the ages. So, to give a fairly ambiguous 'thick' description of quality of life in terms of social development goes some way towards articulating our notion of human flourishing.

What are the implications for environmental education? It is particularly here that the moral character of environmental education comes to the fore. Moral frameworks are frameworks that help us find our way through the entanglement of social relationships. Environmental education based on this matrix poses the question to learners how their particular purposes and actions can impact on the lives of others. Others that live within the local community as well as others that live in other places in the world. Moreover, environmental education based on a matrix of being/doing of human flourishing reflects a particular content of knowledge, a particular way of teaching and a particular notion of how knowledge is developed. Environmental education underpinned by such a matrix would encourage group work, active participation in the learning process, support of fellow learners and commitment to the growth of the social group. Learners would come to realise that their own flourishing is conceptually linked to the well-being of their social environment.

The matrix of having as I have sketched it focuses on the physical environment and the matrix of being/doing on the social environment. The third matrix is that of **Loving** and this focuses on the moral environment of integrated physical/social resources. I want to use 'loving' in its Aristotelian sense of doing something worthwhile well. Inherent in the notion of loving is a sense of 'harmony', a sense of a 'proper place in the larger order', a sense of a meaningful integration between self and others and of living in harmony with nature. Again, the description of such a contour of well-being is a 'thick' description of what we think it is to flourish as a human being, what it means to live a good life. This matrix cannot be separated from the other two, but it can be distinguished from them. It focuses on the quality of the relationship of our physical and social well-being. The various factors that try to capture this dimension of quality of life could include:

Opportunity and capability to participate in the decisions and activities influencing one's life: Developments in modern life have led to our idea that agency is an important part of what it is to be fully human. We feel that we need to take responsi-

bility for our own actions and by taking responsibility, also to have the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect our lives directly.

Involvement in political activities: 'Political' here refers to the broader involvement in the structures and practices that regulate civil life. It has to do with the decisions about distribution and development of public goods such as schooling, physical resources such as water and electricity, health care and employment opportunities. Access to public goods affects our lives directly and so, by participating in and co-developing decisions about these public goods, we enhance the quality of our own lives and those of others.

Leisure time activities: A significant part of our self-understanding is developed in our leisure time activities, i.e. those activities that we pursue not because it gives us money or status but because it simply gives us pleasure. Again, what needs to be assessed is not only the opportunity for leisure time activities (although as I have noted this is important), but also the quality of the activity pursued.

Meaningful work life: The aspect that I want to highlight here is that of having a sense that the work we do 'makes a difference', that it somehow contributes to the well-being of the larger social life.

Involvement with and enjoyment of nature: The members of 'Starship Enterprise' could all score high on the previous factors that assess quality of life and yet, I want to hold, there is something 'missing'. To live one's life encapsulated in a sealed environment and not to experience directly the vibrancy of nature is, I think, a somewhat impoverished life.

Spiritual growth: This is a controversial factor in the assessment of one's quality of life. Perhaps it is because religion is seen as a 'personal' choice (in contrast with medieval times where religion was what gave one's life meaning) and if someone chooses not to pursue his spiritual dimension, we need to respect that. I want to agree that we need to respect the choice, but I also want to suggest that a person whose spiritual dimension of life is important is also a person who experiences a feeling of 'depth'.

The problem with these factors is that they are all couched in particular cultural interpretations. The notion of human flourishing that underpins them is a cultural specific notion. For many people the notion of 'leisure time' is a foreign notion (a dominantly western one, perhaps). If these factors are, as I have argued, important in assessing quality of life and if, as I have also argued, many of these factors are culture specific does it mean that we are able only to assess the quality of our own society's well-being? If this is as far as we can go, then it means that we cannot assess the quality of life of other human beings (never mind other life forms). But there is something uncomfortable about this. Do I close my eyes to widow burning in India and claim that I cannot interfere because it is part of Indian 'culture'? Do I close my eyes to the poaching of rhino horns for it is important in the culture of Middle eastern societies to have daggers with rhino horn handles? Does this not run directly counter to the thrust of environmental education and its message of physical (and social) interdependence? Can we hold on to a notion of human interdependence and a notion of cultural independence, or do we have to forfeit the one for the other? And if so, which one should we forfeit? I want to argue that we can have both, and furthermore, that we must hold on to both notions in our development of environmental education. But then the following question needs to be answered:

Can we have an intercultural notion of human flourishing that is not oppressive?

With the emergence of, for example, post-modernism, feminist studies, minority studies and ideology critique we have seen that certain forms of knowledge are oppressive and silencing of others. Political structures all over the world are edging towards democracies in recognition of the need to accommodate differences. Notions of multiculturalism and constructivist theories of knowledge make it difficult for anyone to defend a transcultural notion of human flourishing. But, if we do not have such a shared concept, then we are in danger of sanctioning through non-interference some cultural practices that victimise members within their own society. A shared notion of humanity makes it incumbent on moral agents anywhere to speak out and to oppose such practices, even if they are practiced in societies that are different to ours.

I shall start from the premise that it is important to accommodate differences of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, language, creed, sexual persuasion, etc. But the interesting question for me is to what extent should we accommodate difference? In any democracy freedom of association and speech are upheld, but if these are used to overthrow the government by violent means, these freedoms are not accommodated. Democratic societies accommodate

difference of religion, but should we accommodate the practice of Satanism? What I claim is that there are necessary limits to the extent to which we can accommodate differences. Just so, I want to argue there are limits to which we can accommodate differences of what constitutes human flourishing. But in terms of what do we draw up those limits so as not to make us guilty of oppression or of silencing those who ought not to be silenced?

I want to return to the notion of the social base of human lives. We accord meaning to practices against a social background and in terms of inherited concepts and conventions. Now, humans differ in many regards, but this does not preclude the possibility of shared meanings. By virtue of our being human and by sharing a common history of humanity (much more so now with the growth of mass media and 'democracy' as a political system), I want to claim (following Taylor, 1989 and Nussbaum, 1993) that there are certain concepts of good and evil that are transcultural. An example of a possible transcultural notion of human flourishing is the Declaration of Human Rights. Perhaps with the focus so much on difference and respect for 'otherness', we have lost sight of the commonalities that characterise our being human. And it is within this very area of what it is to be human and to flourish as a human that we could explore transcultural notions of quality of life and a shared understanding of environmental education. The reason for thinking such an investigation of importance is that the concept of environmental education points to physical and social interdependence, and by implication to moral interdependence. It seems likely that there are commonalities in our cultural or moral environments in terms of which we can assess quality of life of other societies. Just what such a shared intercultural concept of human flourishing would entail is a subject for a much more in depth investigation. What I hope to have shown in this paper is the need for such a shared concept for environmental education and so for enhancing and sustaining quality of life.

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