

## DEMOCRATIC APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: DREAM OR POSSIBILITY?

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Research indicates that few teachers are currently using a democratic approach to teaching in environmental education even though much of the environmental education literature supports and encourages such an approach. Various explanations are offered for this situation although all agree that the principles, goals and processes of democratic pedagogy are often antithetical to the processes of contemporary schooling. Based on a case study of an attempt at democratic pedagogy in an Australian primary school, this paper explores some of the factors that may influence, assist or constrain teachers in their efforts to implement democratic approaches and strategies in the teaching of environmental education.

### INTRODUCTION

Several critical educators such as Illich (1971), Freire (1972), Shor & Freire (1987), Giroux (1989) and Kreisberg (1992) have argued that contemporary schooling is both reproductive of the current, often inequitable, social order and undemocratic in its practices and processes. Furthermore, many writers in the field of environmental education (for example, Colquhoun & Robottom, 1990, 1991; Fien, 1992; Spork, 1990, 1993; Orr, 1992) have highlighted the ways in which the common teaching practices in environmental education field are similarly often uncritical of the *status quo*.

There are many barriers to actualising democratic environmental education within current school systems. As with other educational movements which emphasise democratic, political, participatory, and emancipatory approaches to education many of these barriers relate to the 'ability' of educational systems to appropriate and modify ideas which are new and may seem to be critical of the systems themselves. Since a focus on democracy is one of a number of fundamental elements of environmental education, this paper will explore what makes a school democratic, the conditions which favour and limit the school as a democratic institution, and, using an in-depth case study of one teacher's attempt at democratic pedagogy, ways in which environmental education might operate within schools as a democratic and socially critical activity.

### WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING?

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and The Asia-Australia Institute (1994:3) state that while democracy is almost universally accepted as the currency of political legitimacy ... the term itself is used to signify a vast array of very dif-

ferent governmental systems and processes, political institutions and practices as well as cultural notions and values.

However, the definition of democracy that sits most comfortably with Western notions of 'liberal' democracy relates to a state in which government by the people prevails through the principle that all citizens have equal rights. Such a view of democracy is based on engaging and nurturing the capacities of individual citizens for participation in and commitment to democratic processes (Kreisberg, 1992:205). Furthermore, democracy could be said to be, a form of social organisation in which the voices of all members of a community are valued and in which community members participate in the decisions that affect their lives (Kreisberg, 1992:204).

Therefore, democratic schooling aims to engender in students capacities for participating in society using democratic processes, as well as a sense of commitment to the inherent value of these processes.<sup>1</sup>

Democratic schools embody transparent, participatory and equitable decision-making processes from the level of policy to that of classroom practice. This means that the whole school and its community are involved in directing policy and curriculum decisions. Respect for diversity is encouraged. Students are active in directing their own learning and work from their own experiences. The democratic school, then, is not only a place where citizenship is taught as a body of knowledge, but a place in which knowledge about democracy is accompanied by democratic pedagogical processes. These processes embody democratic relations between teachers and students, students and students, and both these groups in relation to classroom practices, the writing of curriculum and the formation of policies. Therefore, it can be

argued that democracy is, within a democratic school, both the means and the end: it is "education for democracy, through democracy" (Schnack, 1995:22 - author's emphases).

#### CONDITIONS THAT FAVOUR AND/OR LIMIT THE WORKING OF THE SCHOOL AS A DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTION

Very few contemporary schools operate in the manner described above.<sup>2</sup> Sarason (1982:265) argues that the goals of schooling are to both foster the academic-intellectual growth of students and to encourage values appropriate to a democratic society. However, he recognises that most "schools are expected (by society) to give top priority to the educational-intellectual development of children" (Sarason, 1982:265). Therefore, while most schools would probably claim to be democratic, it is evident that they are more closely focussed on academic development than the development of democratic values and practices (Sarason, 1982:265). Furthermore, many (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983; Bourdieu, 1986) have argued that the school has a 'hidden' curriculum which acts as an unalterable framework for education systems and which works to re-inforce the status quo. These arguments range from views of education as an agent of social control (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986) to that of education as reproductive of the current social order (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983).

Reproduction theories of schooling are concerned with the way in which schools operate to maintain the dominant paradigm by replicating existing social structures (such as unequal power relations between students and teachers, the notion of 'right' and 'wrong' answers to all questions, etc.) They argue that new ideas, while they might seem to challenge the *status quo*, are absorbed by the educational system in such a way (for example, they may have to be modified to 'fit' into the school system) that they act to re-inforce, rather than question, the *status quo*. As Ackermann argues (1997:31-32):

We know that learning through the planned classroom curriculum goes hand in hand with learning from the wider school setting - the hidden, the parallel curriculum ... However, separation of the formal curriculum from aspects of school organisation, student welfare, the physical surrounds, and so on, means

that issues dealt with in planned lessons may not consciously be supported by what is being learned and reinforced through students' broader school experiences.

Furthermore, there are a variety of factors which operate seemingly independently of the school (such as the mass media) which also support the dominant paradigm and thereby re-inforce the 'hidden lessons' learnt at school.

However, such studies in educational reproduction have been critiqued from a number of sources (Angus, 1986; Lynch, 1989; Sultana, 1989; Fien, 1993) on the grounds that it is possible for individual teachers to act as agents of social change within the school system. The social action theory of structuration developed by Giddens (1979:72) argues that people are not mindless puppets of external structures, but able to resist dominant hegemonic influences and, thus, capable of "some degree of penetration of the social forms that oppress them." Giddens argues that agents are able to either participate in, concur with, or resist the power relations and ideologies which operate in social situations and institutions (for example, in the school). According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) and Giroux (1988) teachers can be resisting or transformative, critical, accommodating, or hegemonic intellectuals in their thinking and decisions about the influences of the micro and macro contexts of schooling. However, while teachers may be able to resist or transform dominant hegemonic influences and thus act as agents of social change within their classrooms, they often do not recognise the potential agency they may exert in decision-making about, for example, school curriculum and policy. Thus, their power to enact social change can still be seen as qualified.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, such arguments do not take account of factors outside the school which may work to diminish the attempts at social change being made by the teacher (these would include, for example, the way in which children may be treated as 'equals' within the classroom but are most likely not treated as such in their own homes, and even less likely to be treated as such by their society/culture).

#### AN EXAMPLE OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Given the discussion above, what are the possibilities and constraints teachers may face when attempting to be more democratic in their teaching of environmental education? This paper utilises a recent in-depth

case study (Ferreira, 1996) of one teacher's experiences when attempting to use democratic approaches in his teaching. The case was studied, using observations and interviews, over a one year period in 1996. The teacher modelled his teaching on the Investigation-Visions-Action-Change (IVAC) approach developed by Jensen (1993, 1995). This approach allows students, rather than their teachers, to define a local problem of significance to them, to acquire knowledge about the problem, to envision possible solutions and then, based on these, to take some action to address the problem.

The teacher and his class worked through the first three components of the IVAC model, that is, investigation, visioning and taking action, in a linear way while the fourth component of the model, evaluating change, occurred throughout. During the investigation phase the students spent four weeks discussing a variety of local environmental problems and then identified an issue they wanted to investigate. They chose the effect that television viewing had on their health. During this investigation phase, students surveyed their parents and other students in the school to ascertain the amount of time spent watching television as opposed to playing games outdoors. The students also reviewed current children's programmes to assess their content and in doing this discovered that most advertising during these programmes was either for toys or 'fast food'. This discovery motivated students to imagine alternative types of advertising. They worked in small groups and developed posters of their preferred alternatives and then presented these to other students in the class.

At the beginning of the action phase the students synthesised the outcomes of the investigating and visioning phases and decided to create their own television advertisements which were 'healthier' than those currently being screened. They planned the advertisements, wrote the scripts, rehearsed and then filmed their own alternative advertisements. These were then shown to their parents one evening and to all other students in the school over a period of a month. Some students also developed a booklet of outdoor games which they shared with other students in the school in an effort to encourage them to play outdoors more often.

This research raised the following issues:

- \* what should the process of decision-making in a democratic classroom be?
- \* what are the barriers to a democratic approach to environmental education?

- \* what are the possibilities for a democratic approach to environmental education?

### **Democratic Decision-Making in the Classroom**

Allowing students to make some decisions about their learning in the case referred to above, provided the observed students with opportunities to enhance their decision-making skills. However, it also posed a variety of problems. These ranged from the processes which students could use to make decisions to the amount of input and influence that the teacher had on the decisions made. Since a democratic approach to environmental education is concerned not only with the gaining of knowledge but also with democratic processes and relationships, the teacher had to think through how he could alter his teaching practice to enhance his students' abilities to make decisions about their learning. He reported that this was difficult for him because he felt that he needed to have some input into the decisions his students made. His reasons for this were their age (10 years old) and relative lack of life experience, his concern with fulfilling curriculum requirements, and his uncertainty over whether he would be able to accept the decisions his students made. Thus, he decided that his role should be that of experienced guide: "I open doors for them that they probably don't know about and they choose which door to go through" he said in an interview with me early in the research process (26 February, 1996).

Another factor which influenced the nature of the decisions students were allowed to make during the year was an underlying assumption held by the teacher (which became evident through interviews with him) that his students are 'empty' vessels who have knowledge inserted or 'banked' in them (Freire, 1971). This assumption underpinned the teaching and learning in the classroom and meant that the teacher never felt comfortable with his student's abilities to make what he considered 'sound' decisions. Difficulties arose around the degree of decision-making and type of decisions which students were allowed to make given the underlying assumptions of the teacher and other constraints students face because of their age, their social status or voice, the ideology of teaching and learning in the school and the general lack of democracy evident in school structures.

Therefore, questions need to be raised about the type of decisions which students are able to make within contemporary schools. If students are 'voting' on a

range of choices presented to them by their teachers it is difficult to claim that these are then either 'active and informed' decisions or that such a process is empowering, at least not in the sense that Kreisberg (1992) and others use the term.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, while students may appear to have some choice through this decision-making process, they still have no choice in whether or not they want to be involved in such a learning experience, whether or not they feel comfortable with such approaches, or whether or not they are interested in investigating an environmental topic. Thus, while students may be allowed to make some decisions about their learning, these decisions must fit into a curriculum field, must be something that the teacher feels comfortable with and must be something that the school and broader educational system will allow.

I believe it is important to be aware of the limited opportunities which exist for any real control by students of their learning experiences in contemporary schools. Failing to do so will result in democratic approaches being modified to suit the school system while still being referred to as democratic education. If this occurs, we risk teaching students the lesson that democracy itself is limited to some occasions and cannot be expected to operate in all situations.<sup>5</sup> Teaching in this way devalues concepts such as democracy by modifying it to fit the education system to such an extent that it becomes a pale shadow of its real self. Furthermore, such activities then serve to reinforce and reproduce the *status quo* of schools and society in general rather than challenge and change them.

### **Barriers to a Democratic Approach to Environmental Education**

Further barriers to democratic environmental education which emerged from the case study relate to perceived curriculum requirements and the lack of structural support for such an approach. For example, while the teacher said he would have liked to have spent more time using a democratic approach, he felt constrained by other curriculum requirements and did not feel that these could all be met by using such an approach. This teacher's experiences were that pressures from the curriculum, for example, to 'learn' certain information during the year, and from the school community, for example, parents expectations that their children will learn best through 'chalk and talk' rather than 'activities', made a democratic approach very difficult in practice. Such barriers are compounded by the limited place that democratic

education, democratic environmental education, and environmental education in general, have in contemporary school curricula, both in terms of content, and in terms of pedagogy.

### **Possibilities for a Democratic Approach to Environmental Education**

While the teacher was concerned about fulfilling curriculum requirements many of the activities his class undertook were of a cross-curricular nature and would have met some of the requirements of individual subjects. For example, when the class surveyed their parents and other students, they collated the information and thereby used a variety of skills from summarising to adding and subtracting. They learnt how to develop a questionnaire and to conduct a survey. They then interpreted and explained the data they had collected and tallied their results. These activities were done both orally and in writing and utilised a number of skills which are relevant to a variety of disciplines. However, the teacher's concerns that parents would not feel that their child had done some Mathematics or English, show that even though integrated and democratic approaches may be possible, barriers still exist in the form of expectations which are driven by traditional, disciplinary- and content-based rather than process-based approaches to schooling.

Another positive feature of a democratic approach to environmental education which emerged through the case is that the students were enthusiastic about learning in this way. As one student said when referring to the investigation phase of their project, "it's fun and we want to do it" (Interview with students, April 1996). The teacher also reported that student asked him every morning when they were going to work on their 'project'. While part of the students' enthusiasm might be attributed to the democratic approach used, that is, to the 'choice' the teacher allowed students over the topic to be investigated, the supportive and participative learning environment which the teacher had created in his classroom was also, I believe, a major contributing factor to the students' sense of enjoyment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The issues explored in this paper have shown that while critical theories of environmental education may call for a broad, integrated and democratic approach to education, there are many barriers to these being implemented in practice. As Burrows (1990:224) argues, there are a variety of:

background premises, interests and values concerning what it means to be a student or a teacher, and of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge and learning. These features are implicit in the choices made and the justifications given by school participants. In other words, classroom tasks are accomplished with prior pre-suppositions, beliefs and anticipations. Inevitably, these perspectives need to be examined as part of the classroom.

Thus, the particular ideologies which underlie teaching and learning principles and practices act as barriers to the full implementation of democratic approaches in schools based environmental education. Teachers further face structural barriers from the education system, the school, and the formal and hidden curricula such as, for example, the lack of equitable, empowering and democratic structures and approaches in contemporary schools.

I would thus argue we need professional development which focuses on the theories and pedagogical practices of democratic approaches to education at both the pre-service and in-service level, for teachers, administrators, curriculum developers and education department officials, if such approaches are to be successful in schools. Such professional development should not focus simply on teaching strategies and models but also on the underlying philosophies and ideologies of schooling, education and learners which inform democratic approaches to environmental education.

In conclusion, it is not clear whether teacher-initiated democratic approaches within schools can challenge and change schools and society or whether they merely act to re-inforce existing social structures, especially given the structural and ideological constraints on teachers and teachers' own conceptions of what their role should be (Angus, 1986:18). As Whitty (1985:90) argues:

... whether or not particular aspects of education are ultimately reproductive or transformative in their effects is essentially a political question concerning how they are worked upon pedagogically and politically, and how they are articulated with other struggles in and beyond the school.

Perhaps we, as educators, need to rethink what can realistically be achieved through the teaching of environmental education in schools given the barriers discussed. We need to be more modest in our claims about the outcomes of various approaches and

more honest about their limitations rather than valorising them through an uncritical acceptance of them. If democratic approaches to environmental education are going to be used, they need to pay attention to issues outside the classroom such as the structure, politics and ideology of the whole school.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The unquestioned acceptance, especially in the West, of the inherently 'good' nature of democracy needs to be examined. However, such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions are Summerhill in the United Kingdom (Neill, 1961) and Moo Ban Dek in Thailand (Nagata, 1990). Many other alternative schools (Steiner/Waldorf, Montessori, etc.) also incorporate democratic ideals.

<sup>3</sup> Such a statement assumes of course that social change cannot take place through small, unconnected actions of individuals because the 'critical mass' needed to effect social change is not there. This assumption can itself be questioned. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Kreisberg (1992) in *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment and Education* argues that a view of power which is not hierarchical is needed if students are to be given a meaningful and respected voice. Without this, he argues, the conditions in schools will not be suitable for students to become empowered. Thus, the role of teachers is to create opportunities for a move from "domination to empowerment, from silence to voice, from *power over* to *power with*" (Kreisberg, 1992:180-181). Furthermore, both teachers' and students' views of one another (teachers as holders of all knowledge and power and students as holders of no knowledge and no power) need to be transformed if empowerment of either group is to take place (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Kreisberg, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> However, it could be argued that this is a realistic view of democracy where citizens only 'have a say' in the political decisions of their country once every three or four years.

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