

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes aspects of the Environmental Education Policy Initiative (EEPI), as it is now known, with the purpose of reflecting on it and drawing out some key features. Commonly, a process such as the EEPI runs its course with little attempt to reflect more deeply on the process and learn from it. This short paper is intended as a useful learning opportunity for us all.

### BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATIVE

The Environmental Education Policy Initiative (EEPI) had two beginnings, and this is one of the clues to understanding its success so far. During 1992 the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA) conducted a "Policies and Procedures" survey of its membership, following a number of calls during 1991 for EEASA to be more pro-active in one way or another. There was clearly a need to get clarity on what the broad range of EEASA members felt. At the 1992 annual EEASA workshop in Howick, the results of the survey and the preparatory workshop were presented and debated at some length and it was decided, *inter alia*, that EEASA should

be more proactive in emerging processes of change in South Africa, more involved in curriculum development, and more proactive in our lobbying practices (EEASA 1992:4)

At around the same time Thinus Joubert of the Department of Environment Affairs (DEA), during discussions with various education departments, was becoming aware of and concerned about the fact that many of the Departments had not yet actively embarked on developing a policy on environmental education, or on promoting active involvement of schools in environmental education (Joubert 1993: pers. comm.). He was also concerned that the development of education policy for a reconstructed South Africa was already under way and that if environmental education was not represented in the process, it might well be left behind.

The DEA thus made a decision to launch a project aimed at policy development with respect to the incorporation of environmental education into formal education. However, it also recognised that, as a government department, it did not have the credibility to involve all role-players in this process. Accordingly Joubert (who is also an EEASA member) approached the EEASA Council after the 1992 annual general meeting at Howick, with the proposal that the EEASA Council help to facilitate and carry out a joint environmental education policy initiative with the DEA. A Working Group was established and funding for the project was provided by the Department. Upon reflection, the clue offered above turns out to be a key strength of the initiative: the principle of partnership and collaboration.

### THE KEY PURPOSE

At a broad level, the Working Group had consensus on what the key purpose of the initiative was, namely, to influence emerging education policy in a meaningful way. However, there was a range of choices open as to how it could be achieved. For example (and here the range of options is simplified):

- \* To engage with policy-makers by establishing a specialist group to develop a policy document or a curriculum statement consisting, perhaps, of suggested curriculum structures and sample modules; or
- \* To call a national conference of experts with

the idea of formulating policy at that level for submission to a relevant education authority; or

- \* To take the process out of the hands of "experts" and to democratise it; to share it with a wide range of people, including those who have never regarded environmental education as an important curriculum issue before.

As it happens, all of the ideas reflected above were raised in some form during the Working Group's deliberations. Ultimately, the group found consensus on a commitment to the latter option, with elements of the others playing a minor part. It is interesting to note that while there was consensus around a participatory and consultative approach at the level of planning and discussion, when it came to implementation, tendencies towards a more managerial and hierarchical approach tended to emerge again.

In order to simplify the analysis of the process, one could consider two polar positions, although in reality there was a range of positions, each of these being a complex of sometimes conflicting tendencies. There were those who were aligned with a view that society can be changed by means of a logical analytical process carried out by well-intentioned specialists. These views and related strategies are "management-hierarchical" in their orientation. By contrast, there were those who suggested that a democratic process is more effective; this could be called a "participatory-process" orientation.

#### A MANAGEMENT-HIERARCHICAL ORIENTATION TO EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In this approach, one would expect to find a select group of education specialists working within a rationalist framework, that is, basing their work on a logical analysis of aspects of the given situation. The product of their work would probably be circulated to selected authorities for comment, after which the product would be submitted to the relevant section within the bureaucracy for the decision-making process to take its course.

This approach has the benefits of being neat and efficient and of achieving a rationally derived and hence ostensibly dependable product in a fairly short space of time. And, given the past preference in South Africa for centralised, top-

down social management styles, this approach has certainly been favoured in the past. Also, given that environmental education has "socially critical and political action goals", whereas historically (and currently) schools "were not intended to develop critical thinkers, social enquirers and problem solvers, or active participants in ... decision making" (Stevenson 1987:69, 73), it is not surprising that environmental education policy development in particular, is often carried out by means of safe and predictable methods.

However, as applied to education policy development, which is not an unproblematic or uncontested process in society, this approach raises many problems.

#### A PARTICIPATORY-PROCESS ORIENTATION TO EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Unlike the above product-driven approach, a process-oriented approach is more 'messy' and difficult, less defined at the start and remains ill-defined for much longer. It is also based on a fundamentally different view of policy and of policy development, particularly where it takes place within a contested arena such as education. This is where the EEPI and a number of initiatives with similar initial key purposes differed. In our view, policy is nothing unless it includes practice. Writing policy is the easy part. It is also manageable, predictable and safe. This is no guarantee of effectiveness, however, no matter how good the appearance and quality of the eventual product.

A participatory-process relies on a wide range of people sharing the ownership of the product. It seeks out those who are not part of an elite. And thus, for the initiators, it is risky, unpredictable and it can be easily derailed.

Also, though, initiatives for change must take account of, and reflect, the context or arena in which they are working (Hewton 1982). The existing education structures in South Africa present a system in which it had been custom to adopt a top-down, expert-driven approach. The system did not allow for consultation; in fact, it tended to exclude the voice of those outside the circle of experts or those approved of by the system. The obvious long-term deficiencies of this approach are with us today. It was clear that in order for the EEPI to have any relevance in a future context, it would have to take a fresh look at policy development.

This invites the cynical response that a participatory approach was adopted simply because it was expedient to do so. Of course, it was expedient to do so, but we also affirmed a fundamental commitment to participation, consultation and collaboration, a commitment which informed much of our decision-making. If Stevenson (*op cit*) is correct, and environmental education is a socially critical pursuit, then education policy development with respect to environmental education cannot but seek to engage people in debate and to subject itself to critical engagement with 'outsiders'. And if, based on a similar understanding of the nature of environmental education, Naidoo, Kruger and Brookes are correct that "environmental education should act as a transformation agent that will bring about better education" (1990:17), then engagement with and participation in the process is an essential requirement for genuine educational change and development.

Schreuder (1993:2) underlines this in terms of where the focus for engagement should be:

What is really required to bring about reconstruction and change is an altogether new mode of thinking, embodying much more fundamental change at ground level so the teacher becomes the innovator of change and reform, instead of being merely the implementer of it.

## THE PROCESS

Briefly, the initiative so far has included the establishment of a Working Group comprising the DEA, informal representatives from the Education Desk of the African National Congress (ANC), the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC) and EEASA members from key organisations. This Working Group developed a Discussion Document for wide circulation and comment. Regional workshops, an important focus of the initiative, were structured around the discussion document. A national workshop was organised, to which representatives of major stakeholders in formal education were invited (Departments of Education, NGO's and extra-parliamentary groups). Documents reporting regional comments on the discussion document were used as a basis for discussion at the national workshop. Follow-up regional workshops then ensued, to which international participants John Fien and Peter Martin contributed.

The entire process has been widely consultative and

has involved many participants with interests in formal education, from across the spectrum of South African society. The enthusiastic support for the idea of environmental education which emerged from the process was very encouraging.

## EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

We believe that the approach we have adopted has been vindicated thus far (it is far from complete) by the success achieved in a number of respects.

In workshop after workshop in the regions, the broad contents of the original discussion document was endorsed and general support for the initiative was expressed. A review of the regional workshop reports shows remarkable consensus, from the far north east of the country to the far south west. What is remarkable about that high degree of consensus is the range of parties or interest groups represented in the workshops. To see a group with a high ranking representative of a Department of Education in open and amicable discussion over key issues with members of AZAPO and the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) amongst others, is something one does not come across often enough. Additionally, from a position of initial caution, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the NECC have agreed to be represented in a formal capacity on a Steering Committee which is to stimulate the process from here. Thus the EEPI Steering Committee now consists of members representing EEASA and other environmental organisations, environmental education academics, the DEA, the ANC Education Desk, the NECC, the Natal Education Department and COSAS.

Further evidence of the success of the initiative is the spontaneous emergence of programmes of action in many regions, including the production of a source document by the Natal Working Group (O'Donoghue 1993).

This degree of engagement with and informal as well as formal support for the initiative at regional and national levels is, we believe, a product of our commitment to a participatory and democratic approach to education policy development.

With this in mind, the acceptance of the EEPI at higher levels is further endorsement of the merits of this approach. A submission for full representation on the National Education and Training Forum (NETF) has been made. Although no formal acceptance has yet been received, there

are indications that the submission is being given serious consideration. It is likely that the EEPI will be represented on an NETF technical committee tasked with curriculum issues. The momentum and credibility which this process-oriented initiative has developed, may take environmental education to a position of recognition in a national structure as important as the NETF.

And yet we still have not worked out our position clearly. Our documentation is still exploratory and our statements to the NETF can, at this stage, be made only at a broad level of principle. This does not indicate a lack of rigour, but a consistency with the approach to policy development which we have chosen. The 'experts' have learned as much as anyone else, and by being co-learners, others have engaged in debate with us, have invested of their own time, energy and thinking in the process.

#### DIRECTIONS FROM HERE

The national workshop mandated the Steering Committee to continue with the work, including the develop of two documents, a simple accessible one for people who have not yet been part of the debate and a policy options document which might be considered at a national policy options conference during 1994.

Up to the national workshop this year, this process was fairly closely managed. From here, it should become even more open-ended and regionalised, drawing in even more participants into the process of policy development. This means that the process will not be controlled by the Steering Committee, only coordinated. Time will tell how effective this will be.

#### CONCLUSION

In reflecting upon the strengths of the EEPI, two key themes have emerged. The first is the commitment to a process rather than a product. A second, closely related theme, is a commitment to participation, inclusiveness, consultation and collaboration.

The EEPI has successfully demonstrated the importance of environmental and education organisations engaging in the current reconstruction process in South Africa. The initiative still has a long way to go and much to achieve. But without the foundation already laid, it would now be capable only of writing documents in isolation of the major processes of change in the country. That

would amount to unilateral restructuring, which has a history of failure.

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