

Multicultural Environmental Education

by Kristen Martin

When I was growing up, “the environment” and environmental issues seemed out of reach. This is surprising coming from someone raised on a largely unpeopled shore of Georgian Bay and who, by age of three, was paddling her father’s canoe and collecting milk bags and broccoli elastics for her mother. But I can recall a sense of detachment, and I can trace them to my formal environmental and outdoor education.

Elementary school environmental education was restricted to projects on endangered animals from tropical climates. We did not discuss local concerns such as the invasion of millions of foreign ladybugs and zebra mussels — these topics were restricted to adults and invisible environmental decision makers.

My outdoor education consisted of field trips to areas of environmental concern — cities. On a bus trip to Toronto my classmates and I observed smog, visited unswimmable beaches, and witnessed mass littering. No connection was ever made between city pollution and rural issues such as high commuter emissions, untreated water, or a dumpsite sectioned above a main aquifer.

Secondary school outdoor education took me to the “real” environment — to Killarney, Algonquin and Temagami for bi-annual canoe trips. I remember these adventures fondly except for departure days where several classmates were inevitably left behind because they either did not have the money or the behaviour to accompany us; engaging with the natural world was reserved for well-behaved and wealthy students.

My formal outdoor and environmental education reinforced several age, class, place and status distinctions. In many ways, the environment seemed irrelevant, discouraging, disempowering and inaccessible — the topics, issues and places were simply too far out.

Multicultural Environmental Education

A relatively new reform brings environmental education closer to home. Called multicultural environmental education (MEE), its aim is to rekindle the relationship between humans and the Earth. MEE bridges disjoints between global and local environmental issues, between students, teachers and communities, and between knowledge and action by adding the element of cultural consciousness to the education process. The addition of cultural and experiential dimensions facilitates the development of a more eco-conscious and holistic worldview and promotes more widespread participation in environmental conservation.

MEE is “a new field of theory and practice for environmental education where content is influenced by and taught from multiple cultural perspectives. It is conscious of its own cultural perspectives and of the function that it has in the world and in the lives of diverse students and communities” (Running-Grass, 1996).

MEE is based on the premise that the world is experiencing an environmental crisis that is largely the product and responsibility of Western culture (Bryant, 1996). This crisis is characterized by global environmental devastation and international and local environmental injustices. To preserve the lives of humans and other species and to reinstate intercultural justice, Westerners must change their relationship with the Earth and engage *everyone* in environmental issues. MEE assumes that environmental education is necessary to achieving these ends, but also argues for reform. It recognizes cultural heterogeneity — differences in perspectives, histories, interactions, opportunities, neighbourhoods and priorities — when teaching about environmental issues. It acknowledges that environmental destruction and injustices are culturally determined, that culture is not uniform across a nation, and that environmental education must be sensitive to

these differences (Anthony, 1996). Furthermore, it understands that both the process and the content of education must resonate with local community and cultural values, and must extend beyond the pages of a textbook.

A Need to Consider Alternatives

Right to multicultural representation. Canada is rich with knowledge due to the diversity of people contained within its borders. Canada boasts of the highest per capita immigration in the world and counts a relatively high number of aboriginal people in its population (Jimenez, 2007). In 2001 visible minorities accounted for 13.4 percent of the population (Jimenez, 2007) and aboriginal people accounted for 4.4 percent of the population (Carter, 2004). Canada has an obligation to embrace the knowledge of these populations not only because of the failure of Western culture to produce ecologically sensitive living, but because considering alternative knowledge is a constitutional right.

Canada is the first country in the world to adopt a multiculturalism policy and to include multiculturalism in its national constitution. In the 1988 Multiculturalism Act, the Canadian government declared it to be their policy “to foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and to promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures” (Canadian Heritage, 2004). This policy must extend to the environment and environmental education. In their article on multicultural education, Beairsto and Carrigan (2004) argued that educational institutions have a critical role to play in the implementation and ongoing definition of multiculturalism so that the nation’s rich diversity can be a source of social dynamism. With the national goal of annually landing 1 percent of the population as newcomers, schoolrooms and communities will become increasingly diverse (Beairsto & Carrigan, 2004). To be true to the Multiculturalism Act, environmental education must evolve to include new cultural realities in specific community contexts (Running-Grass, 1996).

Minority populations most at risk and most excluded. Research shows a strong correlation between environmental health risk and the social positions of race and class (Thompson, 2002). Poor people, people of colour, immigrants, and aboriginal people are more likely to live in hazardous environments than affluent white Westerners (Thompson, 2002). A Hamilton study concluded that acute health effects from air pollution in low-income areas were more than double the regional or citywide average. The zone with low education and high manufacturing had the largest health-related effects, while areas with the highest socioeconomic characteristics showed no significant health effects (Jarrett, 2002). A country-wide study from the University of Manitoba found that environmental health risks — specifically, abandoned waste disposal sites, hazardous facilities and toxic emission scores — were statistically significantly greater for First Nations reserves and poor communities (Thompson, 2002). The demographics of poor communities betray even greater disparities and environmental injustice: immigrants are 3.2 times more likely (Yelaja, 2007) and aboriginal people are 2.3 times more likely (Carter, 2004) to live in poor communities.

Because class, race and status relate to environmental and human health, these elements must be incorporated into environmental education. Because a high proportion of people with alternative cultural perspectives live in environmentally hazardous areas, there is an urgency to provide environmental education that considers these perspectives as a means of informing and empowering everyone — including those who are most at risk — to identify and to resolve injustices.

Barriers to Multicultural Representation in Environmental Issues

One of the principal concerns of multicultural environmental educators surrounds the word “environment,” which has become synonymous with wilderness and unpeopled places of unusual beauty, and the antonym to urban life (Taylor, 1996). This definition leads to several problems. First of all, it excludes

many environmental issues from the environmental agenda. Environmental injustices, for instance, often involve disputes about the location of industrial facilities, mines and dumps with respect to human settlements, yet none of these aspects fit into this limited definition of environment.

Secondly, the definition limits the participation of a large portion of the population in environmental issues. Untouched natural areas are inaccessible for people from urban areas or of lower income as are “all-natural” environmental programs. Wilderness summer camps, fishing and hunting outfitters, mountaineering and bird-watching clubs, and other environmental societies are mostly attended by middle and upper class whites (Taylor, 1996). Threats to wild places like Canada’s boreal forests and freshwater lakes, northern tundra and arctic glaciers may be of little concern to people who cannot access for such natural areas. Limited concern for these areas means limited participation in conserving them, and limited conservation exacerbates the environmental crisis, which affects everyone’s wellbeing.

Finally, the romanticized notion of environment advances disjoints between education and community, as well as education and action. Studies reveal that many students reject schools because they fail to deal with issues relevant to their lives (Lee, 1996). As public institutions, schools have the responsibility to offer opportunities for students to conduct meaningful dialogues about social issues and to interact with local concerns. But the conventional definition of the environment opposes this approach by confining learning to the classroom and locating “the environment” far away.

Overcoming Barriers Through Multicultural Environmental Education

MEE attempts to improve upon conventional environmental education by making it more inclusive and empowering. It reformulates what environmental education is, where it is learned, what it teaches, and how it is taught while being conscious of the relationship

between culture and environment, and the increasingly multicultural makeup of society.

Redefining environmental education. MEE goes beyond the “wilderness” definition of environment to include environments that are occupied or influenced by humans. Environments are more than green spaces (Sakakeeny, 1996); they can be highways, inner cities, suburban developments, factories, hospitals, corporations, dumps, reservoirs, sewage disposal facilities, military fly zones, Native reserves, sidewalks, school yards — any of the physical or social landscapes that define the modern world (Anthony, 1996).

This extended definition makes it possible for visible minorities, aboriginals, poor people and urban people to identify with and participate in environmental issues. It also helps to prevent the sense of alienation that occurs when discussing the environmental crisis on a global or national level by including familiar environments in the debate (Agyeman, 2002).

The discussion of local environmental issues also increases the likelihood that they will be resolved from a community-based and culturally conscious approach. One example is the Red Deer Social Action Project developed by teachers and students of grade five and six classes in Red Deer, Alberta. In response to a proposal to increase chemical spraying for a mosquito outbreak in the community, the classes set about determining alternative solutions. Parents were employed to guide students through research and activism, which resulted in an alternative solution to the mosquito problem (Moore, Taylor, & Chamberlin, 1994).

It might be argued that the Red Deer Social Action Project is not an example of MEE because it does not address ethnicity or social class. But MEE recognizes that culture does not refer only to race, colour or class, but more generally refers to unique community values and concerns (Agyeman, 2002). The Red Deer project was “cultured” because it used a local issue of personal significance to students, and drew on the specific knowledge, beliefs and

skills of the community with respect to the environment (George & Glasgow, 2002). Owing to this cultural aspect, the program achieved high levels of participation, support and effectiveness (Moore et al., 1994).

The definitions of environment and culture work together to redefine environmental quality — the ultimate goal of almost all environmental initiatives. Environmental quality includes not only environmental health; it also includes the health and wellbeing of the people living within the environment. And this wellbeing is represented by the preservation of human rights, health, culture, socio-economic opportunity and justice (Running-Grass, 1996).

Relocating environmental education. MEE relocates environmental education from the classroom and teachers to the environment and people it concerns. Proponents of MEE encourage environmental educators to use experiential learning and community mentorships as a means of lessening the divide between classroom learning and out-of-school applications (Kraft, 1992). Students have confirmed the effectiveness of out-of-classroom opportunities. A study of urban youth environmental activists found that most students do not identify school classes as significant to initiating their environmental concerns; instead, most credit activities outside of school — especially relationships with adults — as being particularly important (Habib, 1996). Furthermore, all students in the study determined that participatory activities that involve inquiry, dialogue, field research and presentation were of greatest interest to them (Habib, 1996). This study suggests that MEE would be more effective than conventional classroom environmental education.

Revising environmental education content and process. More than a reform of environmental education curricula, MEE is a paradigmatic shift (Agyeman, 2002). Content must be taught in a way that is both culturally appropriate and culturally inherent (Simpson, 2002). For instance, a teacher might go beyond teaching students *about* indigenous customs to teaching students *by means of*

indigenous customs including learning by doing, storytelling, observing, reflecting and creating (Simpson, 2002). The simultaneous emphasis on process and content could help to foster a better understanding of non-dominant cultures, or to present lessons to students of non-dominant cultures in a more comprehensible manner.

Conclusion

Much of the environmental debate has been conducted as though the human community were uniform, without great differences in culture and experience, power and opportunity (Running-Grass, 1996). It has been framed largely in the terms of affluent Westerners, economic competition, corporate power and national policy. Those who do not share dominant Western values feel detached from environmental initiatives and education. Furthermore, the diverse voices and helping hands of these people, essential to developing a sustainable relationship with the Earth, are silenced and neglected. Unfortunately it is also these people who suffer the worst of the consequences of the environmental crisis, including unhealthy living conditions and infringements of constitutional rights. If the debate continues without recognizing the diversity of the human race, everyone will fall victim to the environment the industrialized world is currently attacking.

We urgently require environmental education that serves all people and all environments. MEE does just this; through revised content and processes it adapts to the cultural perspectives and social geography of a community to engage as many people as possible in their environment and thus their wellbeing and survival.

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