

Senselessness: the Manifestation of Educational Practice

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CANADA

**“One Voice” International Conference
The Institute of Elemental Ethics and Education
Westin St. Francis, San Francisco
July 5 - 9, 2008**

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At present there are differences of opinion... for all peoples do not agree as to the things that the young ought to learn, either with a view to virtue or with a view to the best life, nor is it clear whether their studies should be regulated more with regard to intellect or with regard to character.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

Abstract. Future educators need to be in touch with the socio/ecophilosophical roots of education if they are to address the goals of education for sustainable development; they must be critically aware of how a dominant paradigm drives society, and have to understand the role of education as an agent of social and ecological change. Somewhere in all of this is the senselessness associated with not truly accepting that changing our ways through education is a global imperative. In part this senseless view has manifested itself through educational practice. I continue to argue that the teacher education process has disconnected the notion of education for sustainable development from its curricula experience and indeed diminished any opportunity for pre-service teachers to become even “speculatively familiar with the concepts of connectedness and integrality.”

This presentation addresses the importance of preparing educators for the future. The presentation also challenges present educational practice, leadership, and organizational behaviour in pre-service teacher education. The presentation draws upon contemporary research in areas of eco and social justice, program and curricula design, teaching strategies, and organizational structure in order to provide a lucid argument for educational change where it is most needed.

Keywords: Sustainability¹, Education for Sustainable Development, Pre-Service Teacher Education, Professional Preparation of Teachers, Connectedness and Integrality.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is; to stir the ire of those who believe that today's educational practices are simply fine or require a little bit of tweaking; to provoke those who seem academically smug to sit up and listen to themselves; to challenge the status quo who have constantly minimized the importance of education by considering it an “entitlement”; and to assert that the most important *link* in the “educational chain,” that of pre-service teacher education, has been lost in educational change rhetoric. This paper examines a more

¹ Sustainability is the possibility that human and other forms of life on earth will flourish forever.
John Ehrenfeld, Professor Emeritus, MIT

significant and problematical dilemma. That dilemma is the absence of the social and political discussions related to education for sustainable development and pre-service teacher education. In short, this paper challenges those who believe pre-service teacher education is alive and well in the Americas.

In “Coming to Our Senses:” The Preparation of Pre-service Teachers and the Implications for Education for Sustainability (Pickard, 2007) I commented that:

It is challenging to think about how, together, we can change the way we prepare pre-service teachers when one considers the importance of sustainability and the political and economic realities of the world today. Re-orienting pre-service teacher education to address sustainability is a low priority for many in our society. (Pickard, 2007, pg 1)

In that paper, published from an address made at the Third International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability: University of Madras, Chennai, India I emphasized the need to challenge the fact that education, as a global institution, continues to reinforce an educational practice, which in many ways disenfranchises individuals from “nature²” and impedes the ability of children, teachers and also teacher educators to capture and understand the concepts of connectedness and integrality, so fundamental to sustainability.

As then, I continue to argue that the teacher education process has disconnected the notion of education for sustainable development from its curricula experience and indeed diminished any opportunity for pre-service teachers to become even speculatively familiar with the concept of sustainable development. While many in the profession would complain that such an observation is irreverent; to suggest that the notion of education for sustainable development is on the minds of all those associated with teacher education, and, therefore morphed adequately into teacher education practice is simply preposterous. The phenomenological **absence** of knowledge-filled experiences that engage and mesh pre-service teachers in the realities of education for sustainable development is “insane.”

Darling-Hammond’s (2006) Powerful Teacher Education: Lessons from Exemplary Programs provided a recent and comprehensive account of how teacher education is enacted in the United States, in particular: Alverno College, Bank Street College, Trinity University, University of California, Berkley, University of Southern Maine, University of Virginia, and Wheelock College. Similarly, her work also offered brief accounts of teacher educational practices in other countries, including Canada. Like research on exemplar teacher education programs in Canada (Pickard: 2007, Lang and Evans: 2006, Adair and

² nature as the integrality of all things natural

Chiaverina: 2000, Russell and McPherson: 2001, and others), Darling-Hammond acknowledged that; a) the problem of the “apprenticeship of observation,” the problem of “enactment,” and the problem of “complexity” in learning to teach were fundamental “dilemmas to teacher education.” (Darling-Hammond’s 2006, pg 34 - 73)

As Darling-Hammond (2006, pg 35) emphasized “... learning to teach requires new teachers to understand teaching in ways quite different from their own experience as students.” In accentuating her point around “the dilemmas of teacher education” she cited Lortie (1975), Kennedy (1999) and Jackson (1974) by referring to the learning that takes place by virtue of being a student for twelve or more years in traditional classroom settings; the learning to think and “act” like a teacher; and, the learning to teach that requires beginning teachers to understand and respond to the dense and multifaceted nature of the classroom which is derived from the non-routine and constantly changing nature of teaching and learning in groups, as major impediments to teacher education.

Regardless, a more significant and problematical dilemma, which appears not to be addressed in contemporary teacher education literature, is the curricular and organizational barriers past and present educational pre-service models continue to reinforce. Today it could be argued that, pre-service teacher education itself supports the “apprentice,” the “enactment,” and the “complexity” of teaching that Darling-Hammond speaks to.

Pre-service teacher education by design continues to intensify discipline indifference and extrication and emphasize financial accountability through academic results-base-management practices. It persists on fumbling its role within the broader academic community by paying homage to other professional schools and repeats over time the same mistakes using the language of “making a difference” or inspiring and transforming education” as mantras. Pre-service teacher education, whether teacher-educators like it or not, also projects the notion that anyone can teach or can teach pre-service teachers. Regardless of the “tag lines,” the goals of the educational institutions, the theory-practice conjunction, or the endorsements those in the field of education seem to offer, nothing much has or will change unless drastic unequivocal decisions are made to transform the experience of becoming a teacher that emphasize education for sustainable development through understanding and experiencing the integral nature of all things.

The work of Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005, p.11) provided a conceptualization of the knowledge base for teaching. They, like Lang and Evans (2006), Zeichner (1993) and others provided a comprehensive view of the “ways and means” of teacher education; however, all have remained *silent* with respect to education for sustainable development as related to pre-service teacher education. Those, however, who *do* to see the relative importance of education for sustainable development in teacher education programming, tend

to *add it* to existing pre-service teacher education experiences. *They seem not to grasp the notion that experiencing education for sustainable development is in essence, the way of becoming a teacher.* Like Leopold (1949), who recognized that such an approach was “on the contrary [like] merely water poured into the already-thin soup” (p. 290), the “add-on” approach to pre-service teacher education misses the point of what education for sustainable development is all about. As Anne Looney³ (2008) suggested with respect to the “add-on curriculum syndrome in educational practice, “the verdict is in . . . pre-service teacher education curriculum is “full!”

Somewhere in all of this is the senselessness associated with not acting to change the ways we are preparing teachers. Somewhere in all of this is the senselessness of not believing that changing the ways of “doing” pre-service teacher education, to ensure that our civilization has a long-term future, is in our best interest. And somewhere in all of this is the senselessness of suggesting that teacher education in all its manifestations has had nothing to do with why we are where we are in this 21st century of the Al Gore(s), Benjamin Barber(s)Neil Postman(s), Aldo Leopold(s), Charles Bowers(s), Wendell Berry(s), Rachel Carson(s), Scott Russell Sanders(s), David Suzuki(s), and of course many more.

This specious way of thinking has revealed itself through educational practice that tends to complicate and problematize matters; through our inability to effectively change, or for that matter, believe that we must change our present educational focus; and, in some measure through a western culture, which embraces an increased sense of entitlement.

Taking Stock

I continue to be rather frustrated with the fact that years ago we were closer to making sense of pre-service teacher education than now. The educational experiences of pre-service teachers in the mid-sixties and early seventies in many ways reflected an orientation that embraced experiential, interdisciplinary, and multi-sensory learning and considered best place/best practice modelling. Indeed, in many ways the pre-service teacher education programs of forty years ago infected those new to the teaching profession with a spiritual curiosity. Schools, as organizations and “physical plants” were open in ways that augmented and heightened an understanding and awareness of connectedness, integrality and community.

In this regard however, I continue to believe that faculties and colleges of education, as we know them in the western world at least, are in some way “chameleon” like. That is to say they profess to be leading, but in fact are following. With respect to education for sustainable development and when closely examined, their pre-service teacher education programs are reinforcing

³ Chief Executive for Ireland’s National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

nearly the opposite of what they suggest they claim to support. They unfortunately “metaphorically” change their colours.

Teacher education programs have disconnected the notions of connectedness, integrality and community from their curricula and have limited and even confused pre-service teachers with respect to what education for sustainable development is. If one reviews the “exemplary” programs that Darling-Hammond identified, or pre-service teacher education programs, for that matter across Canada, the resemblance of community or that of kinship is missing. As the “chameleon” changes colour the “what should be” in teacher education does not line up with the “what is” in teacher education today. Within most faculties and colleges of education, for example, secondary teacher education programs are distinct and separate experiences as are early childhood, elementary and middle-years programs; all running parallel, with limited if any intersects. The idea of community of learners is a mask as the secondary and elementary folks⁴ symbolically “pass in the dark” not interacting, supporting and most importantly, sharing their ideas, needs and uniqueness. In many cases the pre-service students “majoring” in different disciplines do not, for all intents and purposes, have the opportunity to share their knowledge with others in an effort to enhance their awareness of the common relationships among their disciplines. Teacher education programs reinforce the discipline status quo and not connectedness or integrality.

In most cases these undergraduate degree or undergraduate after-degree programs are characterized by separate course offerings, which are not principally linked to one-another. The programs are often taught by graduate students or seconded teacher practitioners who (while knowledgeable, good willed and overall nice people) themselves are products of the teacher education dilemmas⁵. And not of their own making, neither by choice nor willingness, they are unacquainted with the challenges associated with the significance of the integral nature of education for sustainable development and pre-service training. Furthermore, their status as sessional lecturers excludes them from the decision-making process and confines them to non-political roles minimizing their involvement within the pre-service teacher education “community”. To further exemplify this situation, education for sustainable development currently does not carry any weight with respect to the classes the “faculty” are teaching. If perchance it did, history would suggest that the notion of education for sustainable development would be introduced as an additional curricula issue.

From one other perspective, the “infantilist ethos” can be construed as provocative and controversial when applied to teacher education, however, it could well be argued that teacher education, like most all post-secondary institutions has taken on a “consumer” mentality. Marketing for candidates has

⁴ students and faculty

⁵ Darling-Hammond (2006)

gone “corporate” as it is now in vogue for colleges and universities to view students as consumers. In referring to Barber (2007) one might easily paint pre-service teacher education institutions with the same brush. Barber stated:

Infantilization is at once both an elusive *and* a confrontational term, a potent metaphor that point on the one hand to the dumbing down of goods and shoppers in a post-modern global economy that seems to produce more goods that people need; and that points, on the other hand, to the targeting of children as consumers in a market where there are never enough shoppers. (p.5)

From his perspective it can be easily argued that the pre-service educational “shoppers” continue to be “consumed” with “bargain” educational goods.

To bring some coherent sense to this irrational manifestation of educational practice, one could “lean” on Charles Bower’s or David Orr’s insights into ways of re-thinking pre-service teacher education. As Bower (2001) argued:

The traditions of the [educational] community must be eliminated, with modern ‘anti-tradition traditions’ becoming the basis of a society of consumer-dependent individuals...stated in the contemporary political vocabulary, and eco-justice pedagogy must combine a responsibility for contributing to social justice (in the domains of both culture and natural ecology) while at the same time helping to conserve traditions essential to communities that retain the mutuality and moral reciprocity of the commons. (p. 21)

Orr (1992) emphasized:

...the crisis of sustainability, the fit between humanity and its habitat, is manifest in varying ways and degrees everywhere on earth. It is not only a permanent feature on the public agenda; for all practical purposes it is *the* agenda (p.83).

One could likewise learn from Ronald Wright’s (2004) observations or for that matter Yeats (1920) as both authors take readers on a historical journey of “progress.” Wright through time and Yeats through World War I.

Considering the Experience of Education for Sustainable Development

If the publishers of Ronald Wright (2004) book A Short History of Progress are correct, they appreciated Wright’s contention that “only by understanding our patterns of progress and disaster can we hope to change our ways and ensure that civilization has a long-term future.” Wright grounded his work in the past (patterns) and drew his reasoning from Paul Gauguin’s (1898) demand for new

answers to the riddle of existence or lack there of. In so doing he focused on the *last* of Gauguin's questions as scrawled on Gauguin's 1898 work entitled: D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? (Where do we come from? What are we? And where are we going?).



As the human race “progressed” over millenniums Wright argued that from ancient times until today, civilized people believed they behaved better, and were better, than so-called savages of the past. He pointed out however, that “the moral values attached to civilization are hollow: too often used to justify attacking and dominating other, less powerful, societies.” (Wright 2004, pg 33)

One could surmise that this contemporary belief came about as a result of the innumerable learning experiences peoples throughout the ages engaged in, either in formal, informal and/or non-formal ways. While Wright (2004, p. 34), in reference to Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest (1984), made the observation that through these learning experiences a “precious” civilization manifested itself in precarious ways to be the only way to support humanity in anything like our present numbers or estate”, Wright observed that:

Culture itself has created this uniquely human problem: partly because cultural growth runs far ahead of evolution, and because for a long time now the accreting mass of culture has forestalled natural selection [processes] and put destiny in to our hands (Wright 2004, p. 35)

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) reflected much earlier on the learning experiences of the human race in his writing “The Second Coming” by intimating that the destiny of our “precious” civilization emerged through precarious actions in a perilous state with humanity unable to maintain anything like its “present numbers or estate.” Possibly unknowingly, Yeats gave poetic justice to Gauguin's questions and underscored years earlier what Wright was suggesting with respect to a “short history of progress.” He wrote:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Emerging from both author's work is the notion that civilizations often fall quite quickly. For Yeats, the rulers of the world were caught up in imperialism and expanding circles of power to the point where they would do almost anything to accomplish their goals. In Wright's case, he demonstrated that time showed the results of those trying to expand their powers. In "A Short History of Progress" civilizations crumbled as they "reached full demand on their ecologies." (Wright 2004, p. 130)

This said and understanding that today's power brokers are now global; the "falcon" as Yeats suggests, cannot hear the "falconer" and that civilization has become highly vulnerable.

The precarious nature of today's civilization is in part due to what Wendell Berry (in Wirzba [Eds.] 2002) suggests as our lack of understanding of "place." Metaphorically, Berry's reflection on his relationship to place is an expression of the significance of understanding the "place" of education in society. Education, up until now, could be considered more "coincidental." Now, as he suggests, the "kind of education" is ours to choose and the choice we make is critical to our earth.

Through his words a perspective of the "place" of education in society becomes less surreal. In discussing his return to the place he grew up in he reflected that:

... there was the assumption that the life of the metropolis is *the* experience, the *modern* experience, and that the life of the rural towns, the farms, the wilderness places is not only irrelevant to our times, but archaic ... I was to realize during the next few years how false and destructive and silly those ideas are ... my return, which at first had been hesitant and tentative, grew wholehearted and sure ... I began to see the real abundance and its possibilities. (p. 7)

Wright and Berry indirectly challenge the place of education and those mired in it by suggesting that civilization's capital is in nature and not in its current reckless and insanely excessive insensitivity. One wonders if, however, we can

understand the meaning of “nature” and how education can help us find that meaning. Unfortunately the result of the innumerable learning experiences peoples throughout the ages have engaged in has led us to a moment in time where the world is socially, spiritually, and ecologically bankrupt. The answer to Gauguin’s last question “Where are we going?” “Où allons-nous?” may be anyone’s guess.

Considering education as an experience in education for sustainable development and understanding the importance of preparing teachers to embrace the concept requires the willingness to risk, trust, accept, and humbly respect the integral nature of all things natural. Appreciating this with respect to becoming a teacher in essence is experiencing education for sustainable development.

Experiencing Becoming a Teacher

For many people a commitment to teaching as a career develops before leaving school, providing ample opportunity to plan for appropriate higher education. For others, such a decision is made later in life, so that alternative routes are needed into the profession, ones that can maximize the value of previous experience.

For all who plan to enter teaching, however, one could suggest that the essential qualities needed are:

- a well-developed desire to understand and to work with children and young people;
- an appreciation of the paramount importance to society of the role of education; and,
- a flexibility of mind to be able to adapt as education evolves during a teacher’s professional career.

All three qualities link to the mission most colleges and faculties of education have with respect to their programs. In general these institutions exist to serve society by educating classroom teachers, preparing educational leaders, providing leadership and support for training and development, conducting educational research, and engaging in local, national and international programs and projects. Most, if not all teacher preparation institutions, are committed to ideals of service, outreach and the collaborative processes that flourish in a community of caring and mutual respect. Experiencing becoming a teacher involves all of this, but must now be re-oriented so that experiencing education for sustainable development is in essence, the way of becoming a teacher.

This last notion of re-orienting teacher education does not preclude pre-service teachers learning and practicing the “skills” of teaching. It subtly

suggests that the “experience” of becoming a teacher needs to be transformed into one which embraces and infuses, in all its manifestations, experiential, interdisciplinary, spiritual, sensitive to place, and multi-sensory learning. If we agree with UNESCO (McKeown, R., et. Al. 2004) and understand that teachers are the most important people on earth, and then the move to this “experience” of becoming a teacher is crucial.

The process of learning to become a teacher is in itself “the experience” which brings about the cognitive knowledge, the practical skills and the felt values integral to education for sustainability. Through the “experience” one recognizes the intermeshing and collaboration of disciplines within all imaginable environments. One also cherishes the “touch⁶” of the “experience” when the integral nature of all things becomes apparent.

Fundamental to the process of becoming a teacher is the need to challenge the “treatment” educational institutions have and continue to provide prospective beginning teachers. Arguably the current way of becoming a teacher denies fluency (Barber, 2008, p. 84) where the seeming ease that comes with extensive learning, effort, and discipline, consummates in skill and the understanding of sustainable development.

To set out on a “historical journey of educational progress” current and future teacher educator need to grasp the gravity of preparing teachers for the future of the earth. While the idea may be simple we know it is most challenging. The resolution to the tension between our current reality and the vision of changing the way we “do” teacher education is as emotional as it is creative.

To conclude, certain ideas could be introduced to facilitate the discussion even within existing paradigm(s) of teacher education. No preconceived solutions exist; solutions need to emerge. Together we need to engage in a course of action where collectively we begin the process of engineering education for sustainable development as a result of giving thought to: non-differentiated student entry, sequential core learning experiences, place-based learning, human resource development, ecological and social justice and to developing the ways and means of being tolerant, patient, respectful, understanding, and loving.

As Hopkins (2008) reinforced, “engaging all formal, non-formal and even informal education, public awareness, and training programs at all levels to learn and to educate our way out of what currently appears as an unsustainable future is essential.” As Wright (2004) concluded:

The 10,000 year experiment of the settled life will stand or fall by what we do and don’t do, now. The reform that is needed is not anti-capitalist, anti-

⁶ social, emotional and spiritual

American, or even deep environmentalist; it is simply the transition from short-term to long-term thinking. From recklessness and excess to moderation and the precautionary principle. (p. 131)

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