

DOCUMENT V:

EDUCATION

1.CHILDREN'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADULT'S ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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This title reflects an upside-down concept on environmental education, but read on, it is not really too revolutionary at all.

1. Children seem to be more emotionally involved with their environment and have a more direct perception of it
2. Adults have developed a more critical, analytical and left brain dominated mentality;
3. Children's formal environmental education must remain in the hand of adults;
4. More informal channels should be provided to favour the flow of communication between children and adults;

Studies' on children's understanding of and relationship to nature are rather recent, as traditional knowledge has concentrated on their overall development and their relationship to the human environment. Furthermore, most teachers interpret Environmental Education as exclusively in terms of the teaching of Natural Sciences.

While this scientific study is very important for the comprehension and later competence of the child, there's another aspect of the educational process that has been left out: it is the emotional aspect, which has so much part in the motive of our actions.

This emotional aspect is responsible for many a wrong and hasty actions, as it has never been recognised for what it is: a deep psychic need that we ignore at our peril.

The relation adult/child can actually bridge the gap between the two sides of our personalities and recognize the great influence that secret; hidden needs have on our behaviour, a well-known discovery of Freud and the psychoanalysts of Vienna. . While Freud, with rational arguments, recognised the process of interiorisation necessary for the

good functioning of society, nowadays we tend to rebel to conventions and relish the liberation from constraints, an attitude that has had a great influence on education.

The result has been the concepts of child-centred education, which has created alternative schools or alternatives to schools, heavily influenced by the ideas of thinkers such as J. Piaget, J. Dewey, W. James and B. Skinner. Some schools animated both by sentimentality and theory may be doing more harm than good by neglecting the rational capacity of the child, necessary to live and operate in the world. The assumption seems to be that the rational thought – part of the human make-up – should actually be stifled because it is an obstacle to "creativity". However, any human activity including art requires reason. Even right-brain power, to develop properly, has to flourish within a strict discipline similar to logical processes, as any artist will tell you.

The accent of new pedagogy is mainly on "personal growth", and a shift of the emphasis from left-brain centred education, to a right-brain-centred education – pre-rational and immediate. The proponents of this view however have mixed feelings about the new audiovisual technology, TV, advertising and other immediate, sub-rational mode of communication.

On a more conscious plane, this shift reflects mistrust of the age of enlightenment which has not succeeded, in spite of its optimistic faith in man's rationality, to eradicate evil from the world, and also involves the fear of not being capable of grasping the complex scientific and technological idiom that seems to be the property of a small gifted minority. The class war is slowly becoming a brain-war, whereby a small band of meritocrats has the means of dominating the majority. Knowledge is power. There is concern among some professional educators about the dominance of a "cultural elite" (of which they may well be a part) that imposes its parameters on communities deprived of faith in their own competence.

We may be creating an abyss between the two mentalities. They together constitute the whole human being, in a harmonious

development integrating reason with imagination, objectivity with subjectivity. This must be kept in mind especially in the context of Environmental Education, which should enhance both the rational and the intuitive faculties.

However, the accent on the "emotional" hemisphere, favoured by alternative education, expresses a legitimate interest in an instinctive mode of being where imagination predominates. The subject matter of Environmental Education is not only scientific, but a Mode-of-Being-in-the-World, relating to it affectively. The purpose of developing a type of environmental ethic cannot be separated from instinctual drives. They have created in us an image of nature to which in turn we respond with our actions, in a transactional process. Environmental experience cannot be separated from environmental action.

Our actions are influenced by emotions, even when we think that we are making a wholly rational choice. It is time then to descend into the depths of our motivations and review our real values, as opposed to the ones we loudly proclaim. This is why the study of children's environmental understanding and psychology will be important. Their perceptions of nature and of their role in it determine their behaviour, not logic or scientific knowledge. Look for the child in the man. It is the eternal child in us we should address in order to seek the origins of our responses. If we have developed doubts about ourselves and the tools that we have generated, we don't look to the child to give us that certainty that we crave for, but it will provide a new and better understanding of Why Mankind has generated war when it wanted peace, destruction when it wanted development.

Children are not the innocent beings that we dream of: aggression is an instinctive element of our human (mammal) make up. We are not so much guilty as simply human: if our guilt is being born human, then we share it with our children. There is no reason to believe that they do not have the same impulses for good and evil, that we have. Treat children not as oracles, but as intuitive sources, as a thermometer: then they will be valuable partners in the creation of a better world. We should aim at what is labelled, in child's psychologist's term, the "primitive man" period. During this age the child is interested in activities more related to subsistence, associated with basic elementary needs, which connect him more closely to

nature (J.A. Hadfield, "Childhood and adolescence", Penguin Books Ltd 1970-08-27,).

The environmental scene has also come to an impasse, because of the controversy between pragmatic and technological solutions versus holistic and ethical approaches.

We need a new form of thinking, which is more related to our psychological reality. I propose that environmentalists, scientists, technocrats, politicians, etc., should meet with children, stimulating their own imagination – and the children's active interest in their environment at the same time. As we ask children to share with us the problems and solutions for a better future, we will make them more aware that that future is theirs, and that their opinions are valuable. This in turn will generate more participation and sense of responsibility in the children.

Children can become our partners in conservation. We represent the adult role model, which we must fulfil by giving the best example. We cannot run away from our responsibility.

We are all born within a certain cultural context, which is the ground of our actions. We respond to it. If some educators and environmentalists feel that our cultural values have produced a misdirected way of life and need changing, we cannot exclude our children from this cultural context. If we create an educational system for them, which is completely alien to the one that has made us what we are, we will only exaggerate the generation gap. There will be chaos, incomprehension and ultimately the breakdown of relations between members of the same society. A totally child-oriented environment can bring violence and anti-social acts associated with peer-pressure (Junell Joseph, "The limits of social education", Phi Delta Kappan Sep 72"; also W. Golding, "Lord of the flies").

As one of the duties of education is to transmit the accumulation of knowledge, style and values that constitute the culture of a people, if

our society rejects knowledge as being too "rationalistic"; style, as being outmoded; values, as being obsolete; it will eliminate any adults' positive role. Except for the few "illuminated educators", we have to renounce teaching anything to our children but stand on trial, guilty of every possible sin in the past and powerless to face the future.

What is the choice? Between an inexperienced child and an incompetent adult?

If only children are ethically responsible, and education in schools becomes radicalized and separated from tradition, then the chasm would be total and irreparable.

We can and should learn from each other something.

I stress the importance of a traditionally-oriented adult-to-child formal education while strongly advocating alternative modes of child-to-adult communication of children's ecological values and perception's. Alternative channels, programmes and processes of exchange could be set up, that create an environment in which this dialogue between generations can flourish.

It requires that adults reconsider their own purposes and values as reflected in their modes of living, with the active help and cooperation of children.

You will notice that the maximum effort is required by adults, who should be themselves prepared to such task. The reality is made up by a majority of adults without any knowledge of the task we impose on them. The best hope is in a motivated and intelligent teaching profession, which has still to emerge. In this respect, to educate children is the easier task, if the professionals are themselves educated. In the educational framework I envisage, both children and adults should discover, through examining real life situation that you can be FOR and AGAINST something at the same time. The philosopher E. de Bono reports that when asked if they were for intervention in Central America, the majority of Americans answered positively. Nevertheless, when they were asked to choose methods of involvement, the majority rejected them. This is the difference between abstract thinking and concrete action. The emphasis on

correct thinking or ideology misses this point, because it ignores that people can see something as bad and be nevertheless be driven to do it by inner forces – which do not necessarily have to do with their own perceived self-interest. Children and adults must be confronted with their contradictions. I have heard children declaring their hate and disapproval of the motorcar, but the same children were unwilling to foot the distance from their homes to the school or from home to the train station. This contradiction must be brought to their attention, as a discrepancy between the ideal good and one's real behaviour.

Moreover, we have seen that no matter how many measures and counter-measures are taken by legislators to curtail the obnoxious results of human activities by making them more difficult and expensive, they will never succeed if men have consciously or unconsciously decided to act in a certain way, even if it is pernicious to themselves and others. "... the first reaction to the universe is an emotional one and even when it is couched in rationalisation, it is this emotional current which dominates and eventually takes over all decisions" ("The image of nature in the urban environment" by F. Ferrasson, in "Culture and Conservation, the human Dimension in environmental planning" – IUCN 1965 – Croom Helm Ltd, p. 300). Decisions have a powerful psychological content and therefore are not wholly rational. If we could unlock the real meaning of such compulsive actions, we might be able to solve the "ethical" side of the environmental issue. Meetings between children, adults (parents, teachers, other members of society) can be organized, where such questions would be asked. Children and adults must be involved together in this great adventure of partnership, and with the knowledge that as human being, we are not perfect and we may need to change our perspective from time to time.

Today some advertisers, businessmen and administrators have joined a revolution in thinking, which is called "lateral thinking". They feel the need for a liberated and more creative approach to problem solving. They are learning that in difficult situation is necessary to by-pass the linear A-to-B causal logic type of cognition, and adopt many other approaches to problem-solving, that is based on a change of perception. In his "Letters to thinkers", E. de Bono states: "Why ... when

we seem to have such effective thinking in the technical area, do we seem to make so little progress in the more human area : we still have wars and crime and inhuman behaviour ... In order to make sense of a complex world, human thinking may have developed some habits and orthodoxies which had a certain usefulness at first but then prevented further progress ... Progress can only be made when we back track and escape from the established concept in order to find a new one". He puts forward a good case for the liberation of the adult's mind, often inhibited by an exaggerated input of information, which interferes with the development of new ideas. This state of affair is already known as "information overload", and children are up to a certain point protected from such exposure, protected by their very "immaturity" at grasping difficult principles and theories.

As every point of view is limiting, children do not yet have a formed "opinion" which leads to a defensive attitude towards new discoveries. Adults fear instinctively to have their assumptions challenged. The attitude that we may call conservative has its valuable function, because it prevents us from plunging blindly into new unknown perils. However, it is not yet entrenched in the minds of children, for them possibilities are endless. That is why children are great originators of lateral thinking, which I suggest could counterbalance adults' prejudices. We may laugh with indulgence at some children's ideas, as funny and impractical, but many times some of these ideas reveal a different starting point from which to look at problems. Andersen's story of the child who saw the emperor as he was, without clothes, demonstrates that sometimes children may bring a fresh perspective to an old problem. Instead of blocking this kind of attitude, we should encourage it, and liberate ourselves for a moment from the paralyzing effect by too many notions. This could become a very interesting experiment, in which everybody has something to give and to gain. In fact, we always assume that a child cannot for example visualise and systematize its environment. However, how many times have we allowed it to design its own room?

Children also come up with the most unexpected questions, that can set up a creative train of thought, a focus for discussion, and an occasion for acquiring supplementary knowledge.

They say that the child is father to the man. we must take the psychological approach, that is directly concerned with the birth of values and attitudes. Of course, a farmer's child will be interested in utilitarian issues (for example, the killing of little furry animals that eat up the grains won't bother him, while the middle class child will love the companionship of a pet), this projection of social and economic conditions are inevitable. A tabula rasa condition is not an option. As human emotions are depended on human experiences, the whole must be taken into account in every equation. We shall look at the point where emotions are at their most raw and visible: before adolescence, when the weight of utilitarian calculus, knowledge and the linear type of logic have not yet obfuscated the immediacy of feelings. In addition, we should look forward through the eyes of children, because the relationship that they have with the natural world is more instinctive, as depicted by western writers, poets, artists and philosophers, when they are allowed to be in close contact with the natural world. "The best school where the child can learn that the world has meaning is the direct contact with nature" (K. Lorenz). They should be exposed to the world of nature to encourage the development of qualities as courage, learning ability and adaptive resources. Children, who have a craving for direct and experiential knowledge, for touching, smelling, seeing and hearing, are in the most favourable period not only for apprehending prima face the reality of the world, but most important, for developing emotional responses, and that personal memories that will help to build an ecological awareness in adulthood.

While in Anglo-Saxon countries, recreational contact with the outdoors, through youth camps, schools, etc., is encouraged, I have often noticed that in Southern Europe many parents who still remember their not so far peasant past, which associates nature with toil and low social status, or that have an over-protective attitude toward their offspring, do not approve of an outdoor experience that they consider harsh, dangerous and socially marginalizing. Contacts with the animal world are most important. The dog, that ubiquitous friend of the household which represents a different thing for each of its members, is a real trait d'union between the child and nature. This special non-verbal instinctual communication between the child and the animal, which shares the characteristics of the eternal

child, reflects a sort of identification with nature. If experience concentrates only on the world shaped by adults, it will create an exclusively anthropocentric view and inhibit the later development of an environmental ethic

In nature, adults see a world of obscure dangers, decay, disturbing deficiencies, a place of chaos and disorganisation, and do not recognize the work of an immanent order and wondrous beauty. The best we can do for our children is not to spoil them with our technology, our planning, our ready-made solutions and objects: do not drive them around, do not offer them junk food, and all the other mass-produced conveniences. "Nature yields delectable sensations to the child, with his openness of mind, carelessness of person and lack of concern for the accepted canons of beauty. An adult must learn to be yielding and careless like a child if he were to enjoy nature polymorphous. He needs to slip into old clothes so that he could feel free to stretch out on the hay beside the brook and bathe in a meld of physical sensations: the smell of hay and horse dung: the warmth of the ground ... the warmth of the sun tempered by breeze; the tickling of an ant making its way up the calf of his leg; the play of shifting leaf shadows on his face; the sound of water over the pebbles and boulders; the sound of cicadas and distant traffic" ("Topophilia, A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values", Y-Fu Tuan, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs – New Jersey 1974, p. 96).

This is the starting point. It is when man begins the tentative mapping of the universe inside and outside himself, asks the basic questions about life and sees the world with wide-open eyes, unfettered by philosophical or scientific theories. In the words of the poet "Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur das Offene" (the creature is all eyes opened towards the outside) – R. Marie Rilke : Die Achte Elegie.

The child is ready to take on the world; his desire for unchecked power is almost matched by his sense of frustration and powerlessness. However, as our Western society is becoming increasingly urbanized, our contacts with nature become fractioned in space and time, planned like a work-activity, and exclusively recreational. Most of the time, our children live in an environment artificially made by other people for their real presumed or created needs.

Our landscape is becoming more and more a vista of supermarkets, roads and skyscrapers and nature lovers have to go somewhere else to meet her, and then every time they see her, she has changed a bit, become more worn-out, more used-up, lost some of her prime and wholeness. Not casually, one uses erotic comparisons and senses that she has been "raped".

In some children's art produced for the Assisi Nature Council, I found that the predominant message was predictably a glamorisation of nature, often accompanied by a sense of loss and fear of destruction. Nature is depicted lyrically and its destruction dramatically. The image of a girl looking for a flower in a field against the bleak background of smoking factories, is unforgettable, an image of impending doom that looms large not just on the girl's innocent gesture, but on the onlooker too, who sooner or later will be engulfed by similar devastation. Another painting, the rocket with children at its side trying to stop it, was painted brown, a menacing and depressing colour. Looking at the children's work the world is a living animated reality. Everything natural is good, animals are people, flowers tremble with participation when touched, but what is man-made is inert, lifeless and ugly. The dichotomy is always between a "good" natural environment created by God and a "bad" environment created by Man. Sooner than later, the same child will learn, from experience and adult's example, that that same nature is there to be taken advantage of, in any way that is possible, for his or hers benefit. Even education, up to a point, is contributing to this destructive pattern.

The tragedy is that we cannot know nature without changing it. The same moment that we encourage children to explore nature, we are setting up a chain of actions whose end we do not know. Children must be made aware of the dangers of their behaviour, and that may stifle their spontaneity. A big group of noisy children trampling on a hillside will upset the life, vegetable or animal, of the place. We are faced with the dilemma of either letting loose their natural curiosity or restraining it. We should develop an alternative educational model, by encouraging immersion in and contemplation of the natural world. The interaction between environment and behaviour should undergo a psychological and conceptual change, from the verbal – which will be confined to the classroom where it belongs – to the non-verbal.

However, my purpose here is not so much to explain what we can do for children's education, rather to show what they can do for ours. Even the Report on the International Year of Youth of the United Nations (1985) recognizes the necessity of "participation" of children in their own education and their contribution to general culture.

I have spoken here mainly of the relationship of children and adults to nature, but of course the same suggestions can be applied to the man-made environment. The village, the town, the city – they too must become a field of study for children and adults alike, and the same love, care and attention that we should lavish on nature, we should lavish also on the urban environment that we occupy. The sharing of experiences and concern in the planning and/or preservation of the environment is the best antidote to the destruction perpetrated by different segments of our society that do not want or do not know how to work together. Adults will have to take into account children's needs, which are more eco-centric, and by doing so, eliminate from their vision of future changes the all-pervasive image of a natural or an urban environment that is made exclusively for the adult shopper, workforce and tourist, with its obsession with function, mobility, strict zoning, etc.

In short, talking about citizen's participation, including children, we are entering the realm of politics. There will be many to resist this very idea as too subversive, there will be others who appreciate the principle but are ready to go only so far, as long as the controls, the "wheels" are in the hands of adult "experts", and there still will be some who advocate through children's power a total transformation of society and its hierarchical power structure. I will tend to stay on the middle ground, pointing out from a safe position that though adults have proved to be not always the best of experts (and the results are everywhere to be seen), there is no way to insist that children could do better. Still, the challenge offered to us by children's criticism and participation will no doubt be creative and stimulating.

The purpose is not to create a counter-structure, in defiance of adults, but rather to create a parallel force of inspiration that will work side by

side according to its capacities. Children will be the men and women of tomorrow and without their cooperation, their enthusiasm, their persuasion, nothing can be achieved and our efforts will be useless and vain. Our children know more than we do about life in the 21st century, the same life that we have shaped for them which we are looking at from outside, while they are already inside.

I have proposed here a new task for the future. The era of the traditional stereotype of the child as a totally passive recipient of knowledge has been challenged. Childhood should not be regarded as just a stage of imperfection from which adults have escaped, according to a growing progress from the formless to the articulate, but rather as a reservoir of latent potential, to be compared to the egg in which is contained the genetic material that will develop in the full organism. It is also the source of right-brain power, which is always present – even if not clearly perceived – in our most important decisions. The danger is that we cannot distinguish between rational thinking and irrational impulses, which determine our decisions, as permanent parts of human personality just because we have so little knowledge of ourselves. That part which is still the child in us, and corresponds to a pre-logical, imaginative and mythical form of thinking, stays inside us for the rest of our life. There's no real contradiction : the child's curiosity and the later development of science and technological conquest, spring from the same thirst for the ultimate cause, the primordial quest for meaning and certainty, for adventure and risk. After all, Man's material needs are not all there is in man, but actions that apparently do not fulfil these needs may fulfil other deep spiritual and psychological needs, that we have repressed. The necessary emotional component and the holistic approach to nature already exist in the child, who can only risk loosing it through the process of socialisation (R. Hart, Co-Director, Children's Environments Research Group Center for Human Environments, see

Selected publications web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/psych/faculty/rhart.htm).

I think we can be confident that the future generation will be more ecologically minded. Children respond to the Zeitgeist and what we now need to do is to get them increasingly involved in this movement towards the future. The more children will feel that they are being listened to and their ideas valued, the more they will expand their environmental consciousness and freedom to flourish and to ripen the fruits of responsibility.