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Education for the Environment: Towards Teacher Empowerment

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Abstract

The work of this thesis involves an exploration of teachers' practice in environmental education in New Zealand schools, conducted between 1999 and 2002. Some new theorising is conducted in response to the problems faced by teachers. This seeks to reconceptualise the way we think about environmental education in schools. The purpose of this is to provide a theoretical framework that assists teachers to rethink their practice and, as a result, be empowered to act *for* the environment.

The thesis begins by providing a general background to the field of environmental education and by setting this in the socio-political context of New Zealand from the early 1980s until the present. The research process is described, and theorised using Problem-Based Methodology. The work then proceeds to report on the research with teachers in schools that occurred in a number of phases. It emerges that environmental education occurred in only a minority of cases. School contexts and educational structures appeared to place major barriers in the path of teacher innovation and these seem to increase with school size. Teachers that do begin sound practice appear to have strong values and a theoretical background that informs their work.

In response to the complex barriers to improved environmental education practice, Problem-Based Methodology is suggested to provide an inadequate platform for addressing the issues because it is restricted to addressing micro level problems in schools. Drawing on the philosophy of critical realism that proposes three levels of reality, a Critical Problem-Based Methodology is proposed. This involves three loops of critical reflection. To support this an issues matrix that contains a sociological analysis of schooling and draws heavily on curriculum theory is developed. A reconsideration of the environmental education literature is then undertaken in the light of these proposals.

The thrust of the thesis is that environmental education lacks a substantive engagement with sociology or curriculum theory and the proposals here seek to address that. It is proposed that triple loop reflection assists a better description of the problems of poor progress in the field. It is argued that many educators have a faith in schooling that is not justified by evidence and have failed to engage at a political level. It is concluded that unless engagement occurs at the three levels proposed in this thesis, and a deeper engagement with educational theory supports this, things are unlikely to change.

Acknowledgements

This thesis exists because a number of teachers agreed to be interviewed about their practice as part of their commitment to act for the environment. I have accepted their help as part of a collective endeavour in trying to understand how we might learn to improve what we do in this critical area. Because these teachers are anonymous it is difficult to publicly record the depth of my gratitude to them. That many of them struggled to develop programmes in their schools has provided the insights that are central to this research and has helped understanding of how schools constrain our efforts. For these teachers in particular, submitting to the interview process over a sustained period has shown great dedication. It is the range of descriptions that the teachers, together, have provided, that establishes the foundation for the thesis. I would like to record my deepest thanks and appreciation here and trust that their help will be remembered throughout the work.

Because I cannot publicly thank the central actors, it seems unfair to mention the many other friends and colleagues that have helped and supported me, sometimes unknowingly, during the process of this research. There have been occasions when an article I would never have found has been slipped under my door with no record of who it was from. Many of my colleagues have had to endure me trying out an argument on them, have simply asked how things were going at times when they weren't, or suggested that I go and write it down. On some occasions, this support has occurred in unrelated conversations when friends and colleagues have shown confidence in me that I perhaps did not have in myself. Some people have done all of these things. I have been very appreciative of this support.

In the years since Palmerston North College of Education merged with Massey University and the journey to this point began, the cycles of life have continued. The deaths of both my parents, my colleague David Adams, and of other friends and family has been more than discouraging. The support of the people mentioned above has kept my focus on this project at important times.

This expression of gratitude was not written at the end of the process, but on a glorious autumn evening in March 2003 when I realised that I was actually going to finish. In doing so however, I must specifically thank a number of people. The first of these are my supervisors, John Codd and David Stewart who I am sure at times have wondered what they had let themselves in for. Particularly in the early part of the process, they often said

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When the doctoral process is completed, I hope that the work of this research has some lasting value. I have undertaken it in order to try to make a difference. My deepest hope is that the work will result in some improved understandings of schools and of transformative practice in and through schooling. I thus hope that I can show my gratitude to all those people that have supported me by making a small contribution to a better future, in the same way that we repay our debt to our parents to our children.

David Chapman.

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