

# CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: BETWEEN POLITICS AND PARTICIPATION

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**Abstract:** *We are all citizens of the world and we are called to feel the Earth as a planetary home where cultures, societies and traditions live. These have to be lived with a sense of ecological responsibility and respect of differences, open encounters and dialogue, for a purpose of building a common identity. A new citizenship is necessary, which recognizes the importance of insisting on the creation of a new ethic and a new policy at the service of humankind, sustainable and capable of building the future.*

**Keywords:** *environmental education, intercultural education, participation, politics, citizenship.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In our complex society, we, as self-proclaimed citizens of the world, have come to regard the Earth as a common dwelling where different – and yet connected – cultures, societies and traditions co-exist. Awareness of this common terrestrial identity first came about in the second half of the twentieth century, for only after World War II and the threats of a nuclear conflict, did man begin to understand that mankind urgently needed a common framework of citizenship (Morin, 2000:73). This new need, however, cannot be attributed solely to the awareness of the environmental crisis, for it also stems from the growing demands for new ethics and new politics. These must be expedient for the man so as to enable him to secure the future of the planet by promoting and practising the principles of solidarity, brotherhood and dialogue. The theoretical model developed by Albert Naess (1973), *Deep Ecology*, insists on the common belonging to the planet as it considers human beings woven into the web of life, and constantly aware of and concerned with protecting it (Danisi, 2005:63). *Deep Ecology* promotes the emergence of moral and ethical behaviour towards all living beings,

fostering a worldview that recognises the intrinsic value of nonhuman life. Accordingly, all living beings belong to ecological communities bound together in a web of interdependence. When this perception ultimately becomes part of our daily ecological awareness, we shall witness the emergence of a radically new system of ethics which draws from the cultures of the world and from those common principles that we all acknowledge (Capra, 1998:21).

A matchless contribution to paving the way for a new environmental ethics was given by the *Earth Charter*, which aptly delineated the types of responsibility that any man should take. These include education to peace, ecological integrity, democracy, and a focus on the community of the living. While all these principles should guide mankind at the onset of a new beginning, their preparation needs an inner change of heart and mind along with a newly found sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility (Ferrero & Holland, 2003:31).

In terms of a common terrestrial citizenship, education plays an irreplaceable role, for it teaches knowledge of the past in much the same way as it opens the mind towards the new. Civilizing and uniting the Earth as well as improving mankind should

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therefore be regarded as the essential aims of any comprehensive education which aspires not only to progress, but also to the survival of humanity as it is. Crucial towards the development of an ethics reform is the contribution of teachers and educators alike, who, according to Edgar Morin (2001:80), are faced with three major challenges:

- the cultural challenge, pitting humanistic culture and scientific culture against each other as these are historically considered polar opposites and hardly interconnected;
- the sociological challenge, which should harmoniously enhance economic, technical, social, and political activities through a virtuous circle of information, knowledge and thought;
- the challenge of civilization, which should lead to the democratization of those discourses that initially caused the weakening of personal responsibility and social solidarity.

Along with the abovementioned challenges, there is also the ‘challenge of challenges’ which, in the own words of the French philosopher is: that thought reform that would allow the full use of intelligence in order to face these challenges, allowing, in turn, for the union of two disjointed cultures. This is a paradigmatic reform rather than a planned one as it concerns our ability to organize knowledge (Morin, 2000:13).

### 2. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION BETWEEN POLITICAL COMMITMENT AND THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Environmental education can promote and implement the reform theorized by Morin: it is a ‘tool’ in the hands of humanity because each person has the opportunity, through participation, to contribute to the solution of the ongoing environmental crisis. Participation is a crucial element of environmental education, capable of promoting real belonging and fostering the leading role of citizens as active agents and deeply involved policy-makers (Iori, 2003:57). Environmental education is open to the territory and addresses the problems that are generated within it,

analyzing their complex, thorough nature. Thus, the environment is a ‘research protocol’, a resource for understanding the connections between nature and culture (Birbes, 2003:188).

According Luigina Mortari, environmental education can be defined in different ways:

- It is *educating to know*. This does not imply the mere acquisition of scientific knowledge, but it also provides ‘educational opportunities designed to develop epistemic modalities typical of the ecological approach’ (Mortari, 2003:80). Moreover, it is about learning how to think in a systemic and relational manner, conceiving reality in its interwoven nature, where all parts of the network are intimately interconnected, forming parts of the same unit of survival, including the biological, as well as the social, ecosystem.

- It is *educating to think*. This provides the conditions for everyone to develop the ability to look critically at the problems of the present time. This generates genuinely ecological behaviours, allowing to abandon, for example, the logic of consumption and of unlimited growth. It is about taking care of the environment in much the same way as it is about taking care of social relationships, thus building relationships based on the values of solidarity and friendship (Mortari, 2003:81).

- It is *educating to ethics*. Ethics has changed its aim. In this respect, relations between people aren’t the only ones worthy of study; it is also important to analyze the ways in which people interacts with plants, animals, and with the planet as a whole. Thus, in Jonas’ own words, what we need here is ‘an ethics for the technological civilization’ (Jonas, 2002). The commitment of education is about ensuring the growing awareness of the necessity to adopt an ethic of responsibility, leading, in turn, to committing to every life form on the planet.

- The main results expected from an efficient environmental education are:

- the knowledge needed to help people to gain awareness and sensitivity to environmental issues;
- the knowledge necessary to acquire the ability to understand the environment and its

problems, focusing on the role that man plays in modifying nature;

- the attitudes useful to allow people to acquire values and skills to improve their sensitivity towards the environment and its problems;
- the skills necessary to enable people to acquire the ability to identify, analyze and solve environmental problems;
- full participation, so that people can actively cooperate in actions that are aimed at solving environmental problems.

In light of the abovementioned results, environmental education, can thus be defined as education towards change; education to a logic different from the currently prevailing economical one; education to wisdom. Environmental education demands that teachers aren't mere wielders and transmitters of knowledge, but that they constantly cooperate with their students to seek shared solutions to everyday issues.

Environmental education uses the generative principle as one of its characteristic features and is always open to the unforeseen, to the new and to the different. For this very reason, it has a purely political connotation and it is, indeed, education to politics.

The ecological crisis has brought to the fore the sad reality of the unequal distribution of resources on the planet. This unfair distribution is not just physical (such as unequal water availability, which is perhaps the most striking example of this injustice), but it also has economic ramifications (the so-called third-world countries have always been impaired in their abilities to develop) and *capabilities*, as Amartya Sen (2001) would put it. Educating to the environment is not just educating to respecting the planet but it also involves educating to love justice, to practice solidarity, and, finally, to fight for a more equitable world. It must be capable of providing people with all the necessary conditions to fully realize themselves, enabling them to become genuinely related to all other living beings.

How is it possible to combine environmental education and intercultural education then?

### 3. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: AN EDUCATIONAL PROPOSAL

In its broadest sense, the environment is made up of relationships and communication opportunities stemming from its own elements. When this definition is applied to education, the possibility of integration and co-existence of every person within their social group grows exponentially. Similarly, the increasing multicultural and multiethnic transformation in our society should, in turn, lead to focus on the relationships between people and different cultural groups in order to develop programs and projects that are genuinely intercultural. The first step to take in addressing environmental issues in an intercultural perspective is to garner full awareness of the environment, learning how to perceive it, to observe it and to study it, becoming able to look at it with new eyes and allowing it to surprise us. The theme of biodiversity, in particular, allows to combine the perspective of environmental education and intercultural education, for it leads to the recognition of diversity as 'value in itself' which we should promote and respect, forcing us to rethink critically and deeply about the manifestations of intolerance and misunderstanding, about the persistent discrimination, both forgotten and repressed (Binanti, 2012:12).

Environmental education and intercultural education cooperate towards the creation of a new *habitus*, a new mindset which is capable of listening, talking, and surpassing our own prejudices (Cambi, 2006). They both involve acts of reciprocity capable of valuing minorities, without exacerbating their rights, and protecting the 'collective rights' where all the constitutive principles of mankind reside (Traverso, 2012:65). The environment, place and educational factor *par excellence*, will become the mediator of meanings in view of the construction of widespread social knowledge, owing to the continuous and fruitful dialectic relationship between different cultures.

Environmental education and intercultural education share certain basic principles: difference, responsibility, and interdepen-

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dence. Through a gradual process of knowledge transformation and protection, both may encourage the creation of a link with the environment which can be either close or remote. Any educational proposal about diversity can only benefit from drawing on environmental education, for it will not only help people understand the true and positive value of diversity, but it will allow us to single out and discover the preciousness of connections, ties and relationships. Any such proposal will bring about effective educational programs capable of generating reflexivity open to differences, reciprocity, respect and responsibility towards the environment. We must promote environmental education projects within an intercultural perspective, especially in schools, where, as it is, there is an increasing need of a radical change not only in curricular terms, but also in terms of policies and structures. We will need to go beyond the traditional understanding of teaching / learning process so as to rediscover the centrality of the learner, even to the point of changing our teaching practices. As stated in the epilogue of the *Charter of the Earth*, it is essential that educational institutions be able to generate and promote a 'creative leadership' (Ferrero & Holland, 2003:31), capable of promoting the transition from a transmitting education to a transformative one. The main focus will be placed on the entire educational process rather than its results. Learning will therefore be the result of inquiry and of problem solving as well as of cooperative work and critical thinking.

Favouring the coexistence of theory and practice, experience and reflection for theory, as well as the emotional component and the rational component, the school can be considered as an opportunity for research into environmental education in an intercultural perspective, allowing for the participation of students in developing new knowledge. This is an area of creativity that increases self-motivation and self-esteem, while also extending the breadth and the depth of everyone's skills as it brings everyone to interact and confront their skills (Ferrero & Holland, 2003:72).

### 4. THE GREEN CLASSROOM: FOR AN EXEMPLIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Particularly interesting examples of an intercultural-oriented environmental education project are the green classrooms. Their very name defines these structures: 'classroom' refers to a place dedicated to learning and knowledge while the adjective 'green' refers to the fundamental aim at its core: the introduction of a piece of nature in the school. The green classroom can help understand how ecosystems work, showing how to value biological diversity as a means to improve the quality of school life, how to manage space and time, and how to respect the rhythms of nature. The green classroom can therefore become a place of knowledge creation, especially through the questioning of different cultures, not only in terms of place (e.g. students of different nationalities), but also in terms of time, since it involves the participation of people of different ages (the students' parents) who can work together to improve the green spaces of the school.

The green classroom can become an opportunity for continuing education for teachers and students as it provides space for research as well as for communication where debates of beliefs and different points of view are amply discussed. It is also a place for research that does not end with the construction of the garden, but continues through its care and maintenance.

Education, then, is not only responsible for the learning processes, but it is also responsible for creating proposals that are flexible and holistic. Such proposals ought to inspire students to embrace lifelong learning, bringing them to reflect and encouraging them to express themselves, to relate to each other and to assume the perspective of those who constantly inquire into their everyday reality. The educational pathways which originate from these considerations and conditions, will thus recognize communication as the essence of education: communication is recognition, respect, fellowship, and acknowledgment of

the value of other people's ideas; it is 'the ability to get to the other', to open up to the environment, to tread the paths of understanding and expression, to promote the learning processes and to facilitate an open learning' (Ferrero & Holland, 2003:70).

Education has the duty of bringing people to re- discover themselves as individuals capable of building, developing and maintaining relationships with fellow human beings as well as with other species, so that, through these relationships, they can wholly understand the meaning of being citizens of a planet that is a spectacular living being in itself.

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