

Value as a Reason for Action in Environmental Education

Martin Ashley
University of the West of England, Bristol
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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between pro-environmental behaviour and the way in which children make value judgements about the environment. The philosophy of value and pro-environmental behaviour is examined in a literature review and discussion which analyses in depth the contrasting approaches to valuing the environment taken by a dominant anthropocentric ideology of technological fix and environmental management, and an alternative or countercultural ecocentric ideology which looks to intrinsic value and “rightness” in the natural world.

The discussion of the values of environmentalism is extended into a discussion of the nature of values within the school curriculum. A contrast is drawn between the aspiration for an essentially “value-free” objectivity associated with traditional subjects and the inevitability of value judgements arising in connection with cross-curricular or interdisciplinary environmental education. The desire for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the “whole child” is seen to involve questions of values and value judgement which conflict with the notion of a “value free” curriculum.

The psychological nature of values and attitudes is examined in some depth, with an emphasis upon the concept of weakness of will. Practical experience of action and the education and development of the emotions are seen to be important in the development of values and attitudes as well as the education of reason and the intellect. “Wisdom” in environmental decision making is seen as a product of the education of both reason and emotion, combined with experience of action. Scientific uncertainty requires the application of wisdom, and it is unlikely that the education of reason or the intellect alone will be sufficient to resolve the kind of dilemma that is involved in the *precautionary principle* (which is seen as a value judgement in favour of the environment when scientific evidence is inconclusive).

The value ascribed by the subjects of the study to aspects of the environment and natural world is quantified by methodologies derived from environmental economics and the question of environmental ethics is explored in relation to this. A social critique is developed as the difference between the value of environmental assets and the values of the children that are revealed by a study of how value is ascribed.

The conclusion of the work is that children are socialised into an anthropocentric, reductionist culture which tends to treat the environment and natural world as though they were made up of commodities to be consumed. The results demonstrate that although most children may express a value for various aspects of the natural world, such as wildlife, this value is unlikely to be a recognition of intrinsic value in nature, but of potential or actual use benefits. Where apparently pro-environmental behaviour does occur, it can usually be explained by extraneous social reasons, or reasons in which the advantage of the behaviour is to the benefit of the child rather than the environment. Children's hedonistic orientation may be insufficient to generate moral commitment to pro-environmental behaviour. In addressing this it is necessary to improve both scientific understanding and the process skills of ethical reasoning. The study looks forward to the forthcoming National Statement of Values with these findings in mind.