Action Research

The Critical Role of Children's Environmental Education in Community-Based Sustainable Development

by Roger A. Hart

Environmental education must be radically re-conceived, writes Roger A. Hart, Professor of Environmental Psychology at the City University of New York and Co-Director of the Children's Environment Research Group.

The question of how children become concerned about the environment is a very important one for anyone who believes that a concerned and informed citizenry is central to the healthy stewardship of the earth. While much has been written on environmental education practices, we actually know very little about how and why children develop a concern for the environment.

One problem is that educators, usually **assign** children to work on environmental projects rather than **involving** them in identifying problems themselves and **collaborating** with them in finding solutions. This is founded, I believe, in a restricted notion of the value of children's actions in environmental learning, thinking only that such direct experiences are necessary for their cognitive understanding.

But children's actions with environments have importance beyond the purely cognitive: there is considerable theoretical basis for believing that concern for the environment is based in an **affection** for it — and this can only come from autonomous or unmediated contact with it (Hart and Chawla, 1982).

That means that children are only likely to develop a genuine, lasting sense of ecological responsibility out of a **personal knowing** of the non-human environment. If this is true, we need to be concerned about the narrowing of everyday, spontaneous contact with environments.

Children's free access to outdoor environmental diversity in some industrialized countries, for example, is being dramatically curtailed due to fears of crime and traffic (Hart, 1987; Hillman and Adams, 1992). And, ironically, while electronic media enables children in many countries to have greater understanding of global environmental issues, their intimate knowledge and concern for the local environment is diminishing.

This analysis of the roots of environmental concern has many implications for social policy, but a central one is surely the need to fundamentally connect schools with both their surrounding physical environment and with the residents of their community. With such a policy, schools can assist in the planning and management of community-based sustainable environments and may even serve as the catalysts for this.

The importance of schools

There have been remarkably few attempts by nations to foster community participation of children or youth through their public school system (Ward and Fyson, 1976; Hart, 1992). Most public schools in

most nations remain completely isolated from their surrounding communities and their environmental problems. It is difficult to imagine, however, how a citizenry can become interested in democratic participation except by experiencing its benefits, yet civic responsibility is still taught as a classroom subject, through texts, as with the remainder of the school curriculum. Even in the progressive educational philosophy of John Dewey, and the many which have followed it, democracy was taught in a simulated manner — by using the school as a microcosm of society (Dewey, 1900). Now, with the growing global recognition of the environmental crisis and the rush by many nations to develop environmental education programmes, it is critical that we emphasize the need for a genuine involvement of children in the environmental issues of their own surrounding communities.

Primary schools are particularly important because they are the institution most children in the world attend. Unfortunately, teachers are usually fearful of conducting field-based activities with their children. We need to convince developmental and environmental NGOs that schools can be the focus for long-term strategies of local environmentally sustainable development. They need to merge their community development and environmental goals with the curriculum goals of teachers. This requires collaboration in designing programmes with teachers and continued in-service support for each teacher in learning how to satisfy their curriculum goals through research and action on the local environment.

From local to global understanding

One of the most useful roles children can play is to conduct research on the quality of the environment and communicate their findings to the larger community including community leaders, planners and politicians. Such research is frequently of much greater value to a community than some minor physical improvement and, as long as the children feel that adults listened to their conclusions and engaged in a dialogue, the benefits to their sense of 'ownership' of their community are great. Furthermore there are extraordinary educational benefits to children when they feel that they are genuinely involved in research with a purpose. For children to feel that they are playing a useful role in environmental improvement it is not necessary that they physically change it.

The 'community exchange approach' described below is one of those rare programmes which fosters a perspective on the environment that is grounded in the local definition of environmental problems — and that also attempts to explore these problems in a larger, global context (Hart and

Perez, 1981). It does so by having children from one community share their research with children from another community.
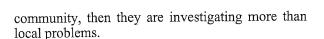
A case study: The Community Exchange Approach to Environmental Education

In a demonstration project with schools in New York, New Jersey and the New England States, children living in dramatically different communities corresponded with one another for a year about their research on the environment of their community. The experiment involved students 9 to 14 years old. The project served as a focus for teachers to integrate all subjects of the school curriculum. Only modest in-service support was required to help the teachers see how to meet some of their particular curriculum goals through the project.

In the first exchange of letters, children abandoned the stereotypes they had held of each other and of their respective environments. Then, in each classroom, local environmental study sites were identified by the children themselves through their own experiences and through interviews with community residents. These sites were locations that were slated to change or that the children thought should be changed. The children then spent the year studying these sites, projecting alternative futures for them, and assessing the positive and negative social and environmental impacts of their proposals. Each classroom created a book of their own community's environmental study sites. They also constructed a book of their 'twin' community's study sites through the correspondence.

At the end of the year, they visited their twin communities with enough background to tour the sites and to have informed discussions without adult mediation. The classes also made presentations to community residents, environmental planners, community leaders and local political representatives. These discussions may not often lead to physical changes but, more important than this, through dialogue with adults children come to understand the environmental decision-making process in their own community and what role they might have in that in the future. From such projects the most important changes occur in the minds of the children — and in their increased sense of caring for their community.

The correspondence exchange process leads quite naturally to classroom discussions on both commonality and the differences in their two environments and in their communities' priorities. This provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to lead children into discussions of regional, national and global environmental problems. If the children discover that damage to trees in the park of their urban 'twin' community is being caused by the same pollutants that are damaging the trees of their own rural

community, then they are investigating more than local problems.

I would like to add two things to keep in mind about the community exchange approach. First, while electronic media can be seductive, it is important to keep issues close to home and to use an accessible,

Please send your examples of environmental projects for inclusion in a new UNICEF book: *The Children's Participation Handbook: Methods for Environmental Research and Action by Citizens Aged Four to Fourteen*. Roger Hart, UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Plazza S.S. Annunziata 12, 50122 Florence, Italy.

multi-media style of communication through drawings, charts, photos and artifacts collected from the environment. Second, involving the older generation in the project can add wisdom and perspective. In Matt Kaplan's 'Neighborhoods 2000' project, children work together with senior citizens to investigate community environmental issues.

Education for sustainable development

Environmental education must be radically reconceived in order to be seen as fundamental to the residents of communities from all social classes in all countries. We need programmes based in the identification and investigation of problems by residents themselves. Environmental education from this perspective is intrinsically tied to community development in general.

In place of 'field trips', 'action research' becomes the dominant methodology. The only hope for achieving the global participation of citizens in solutions to environmental problems is to build from modest local bases of community-based research and action. We need more models which genuinely recognize the untapped competencies of children to play a significant role in community-based sustainable development, particularly when collaborating with adults. Not only must development be environmentally sustainable for the future, but public involvement in environmental action must also be sustained. This will only come from a citizenry which feels truly involved in their local community.

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