

The Nowhere Land of the Environmental Educator

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In many ways Environmental Education (EE) appears to be making strides in its growth as a discipline. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has recognized EE as a component for its evaluations of teacher certification programs. Non-formal certification is starting to emerge as an option in a handful of states. An increasing number of schools have developed scope and sequences for their schools around EE, and environmental-based centers have increased their programming in and outside the classroom setting (Baust, 2007; Weiser, 2007).

One of the most significant efforts accomplished to date in the field of Environmental Education was coordinated through the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE) and the Environmental Education and Training Program (EETAP) which led to the development of Environmental Education standards for both the formal and informal settings (NAAEE, 1998). Specific mission, goals and objectives were identified for K-12 school programs and student outcomes were linked with existing state and national standards in the traditional disciplines. This effort provided documentation for how teachers and organizations can implement EE in schools by not adding additional content and skills but by reorganizing what they do using an interdisciplinary model. These models have been the focus for a number of research studies including the SEER report that was prepared by the State Education and Environment Roundtable (National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, 1997). The results of this nationwide study showed that students in environmental education programs "earn higher grades and score better [on standardized tests] in reading, writing and math" (NEETF, 1997). Additional results showed that students in the environmental-based schools studied had fewer attendance, attitude and discipline problems than their peers in traditional classrooms. While these exciting outcomes are celebrated in the Environmental Education field, underlying struggles still exist that hinder future growth in the EE reform movement. The struggles are occurring in a variety of settings and involve significant misconceptions of what EE does. What is the status of environmental educators in the formal and informal world? To what degree is the discipline still marginalized verses well integrated into the mission,

scope and sequence of the organizations it is involved in. It is worth to look at the formal and informal nonprofit world and how EE fits in this setting.

It is hard to find an environmental nonprofit organization that does not have an education goal as part of their mission. This is reflected in their operations in as simple of a task as going into schools and presenting information, to more complex projects like designing and implementing set curriculum. Whatever the format chosen education is almost always found in some format. Since nonprofits in the environmental field commonly are fighting immediate problems with the environment such as timber sales, water pollution, or species elimination, education commonly plays a back seat in the pecking order of what is done and what is funded. Because of the immediacy of the need to address and stop environmental problems, the position the education commonly finds itself in has created a perception that education objectives are less important.

While the environmental educators often find themselves marginalized in the nonprofit environmental field, the formal school environment can be equally uninviting. Here the common misconception that EE is composed of radical environmentalists can be found and in certain situations is magnified. Many believe this comes from the environmental movement having roots in the sixties, with liberal and what was characterized as radical agendas playing a major role in this. However, EE in its infancy in the late sixties and early seventies typically was not involved in direct environmental activism. One of the first community programs it set up was Earth Day, which was much more a celebration rather than attempting to protest or solve specific environmental problems. Having the first term in its name be "environment" set a perception that has not left the field and radiates a bias in the formal education setting.

Activism is the key reason why the formal education environment has in some cases extended the marginalization of environmental educators. One of the major concerns by teachers and administrators about environmental education over the years involves the perception that students are given biased information that may lead to their becoming environmental activists. This would conflict with the value systems of a significant number of families, and in many cases the mission of schools.

Embedded biases, misconceptions, and perceptions have all played a role in the nowhere land many environmental educators find themselves. Many environmental educators find themselves not accepted in either setting. All is not lost, however. What should be comforting for an environmental educator to know is they are in most cases more than adequately trained to accomplish the mission, goals, and objectives

for both settings. In the environmental nonprofit world, mission statements revolve around a resource and its sustainability. To truly make a resource sustainable, however, you need to get people to change their values and in turn their behavior involving the use of this resource. This is exactly what EE aims to do, change behaviors. To accomplish this, however, it will need to involve long-term programming and multiple strategies with youth through adults. EE is central to any organization that attempts to change behaviors. Organizations that try and change laws or do research have their place in understanding and solving environmental problems, but do not directly address how to change individual behaviors regarding the resources at hand. Environmental Educators have the comfort of knowing that they have the training and skills to effectively address the missions of environmental organizations.

In the formal setting one way to get a picture of how teachers, administrators, and parents perceive the environment is to ask them a simple question. Do you want the surroundings and resources you have to be there in the future? Does education play a role in making this happen? You overwhelmingly get a response that they would like the places they live, work, and play to be there for their own use, their family and their communities, and that education should address this need. The beliefs and values for sustainability are ubiquitous in our society. It is an overarching theme in many religions, philosophies, laws and education. And this unifying belief is at the core of what EE tries to do -- make our place sustainable over time.

If environmental educators are not outliers in the settings they try to work in, but rather are significant and essential players in these settings, how can the perceptions and misconceptions change? One solution for both professions is to get training and experience in what EE is and how it is implemented. This means Environmental Studies and Teacher Training programs need EE to be a core competency in what students learn. EE courses should be offered that not only involve learning and experiences about what EE is but also specifically address societal misconceptions and perceptions. Another possible mechanism to this problem is to speak with educators and environmentalists about EE in terms that are non-threatening. By asking what people believe in and not using specific terms which bring the baggage and misconceptions, you can identify common beliefs and move ahead to address these. In the nonprofit world this would involve helping address an organization's mission statement and what components need to be in place to meet the mission. Whether you specifically say that the models are reflective of EE or not, what is important is that the pieces are in place to meet the mission and sustainability. In the formal education world it involves talking with students, teachers, administrators, and parents about the common interest in sustainability and how this can be achieved. By mutually constructed missions, goals, and objectives what happens in the schools can not only be supported, but made even more effective with the involvement of multiple parties. And lastly, Environmental Educators can be actively involved in the professional communities of both fields and encourage EE as a player in ongoing training in the fields.

This means doing workshops, providing grants and support to incorporate EE into the organization or school and having information about where to get resources that support EE.

The EE community is currently at a very exciting time with the strides it has made in formalizing the discipline and getting recognition from more standardized organizations in our communities. At the ground level, however, there appears to still be a significant presence of misconceptions and what EE is. These misconceptions are what EE practitioners are facing while the leaders in the field put in place an infrastructure of support. In time the two will meet, but for now it is patience and the comfort of knowing that you not only fit in, you are essential.

References

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