



INSIDE AND OUT

EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Tiff Bollhorn

EDUCATION

What happens when we go outside and visit a ladybug? When we are compelled to attend to one small, lively red dot, and in one sudden moment, thing starts to feel different. One little beetle, a little time, silence and attention, and the pulse of the Earth is felt again. In our ever-increasing technological lives, which paradoxically, isolate us more and more from each other and the outside world, it is even more important to attend to these moments, and create these moments to attend to. The gentle sacredness of life cannot be taught - it must be experienced; the ladybug becomes the teacher.

It is becoming increasingly evident that children are emotionally affected by the state of the global environment. Many educators worldwide are

realizing the negative effects resulting from young people often prematurely dealing with environmental issues. It is recognized that many children are not only overburdened with incessant dire facts but, most importantly, lack a grounded sense of connection with Nature in the first place in the face of this technological age. Two factors coupled together: children's lack of both *stable bonds* with the environment around them as well as the reassurance of a *stable environment* in which to grow up, produce a profound impact on children's lives. Signs of depression, fear, deep despair and apathy are becoming common and giving rise to what Elin Kelsey, esteemed educator and author, refers to as a "culture of hopelessness". There is an alarming void in the field of educating for a more positive future and we as educators have a responsibility to rise to the call for action. Youth wellbeing in the face of ecological disconnection and overstimulation of information, are what

attuned educators are now registering as a rising issue in sustainability.

It is evident that living sustainably must begin with ourselves, not in the usual terms of action, but in quite the opposite - in sustaining ourselves and our psychological and emotional well-being before we even attempt sustaining life on Earth. How are we meant to maintain the greater relationships of the life-supporting systems on Earth, when our own relationships with the natural world and each other are not maintained or properly formed to begin with, as is the case with many children's connections to Nature? The world of electronics and devices is rapidly winning over youth and participation and interest in the 'real' world is rapidly being replaced by the 'virtual' world with each day that passes towards a more uncertain future.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood, and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to

long for the endless immensity of the sea" (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

In order to cultivate healthy, young environmental minds and, on a grand scale, nourish a planet in ecological peril, a shift from more *quantitative* to *qualitative* Education for Sustainability is needed. Firstly, for more 'qualitative' education it is vital that we move from a focus on learning *material* to learning *experiences*, and these experiences must prioritize 'green-time' or learning in and with Nature as much as possible. While many disheartened children today silently yearn deep down to feel a belonging in this vast, estranged living world, a growing body of research speaks to all the numerous cognitive, psychological, spiritual and physical benefits linked with time spent in Nature. Having years of involvement in outreach environmental education with numerous organizations, it never ceased to amaze me when I would catch a glimpse of some students quietly rekindling their relationships with Nature through a leaf, stick, or handful of dirt in a quiet moment of the day. This deep primordial nourishment only Nature can provide a young being, like a gentle tug back to the Earth out of which we came.

Secondly, to privilege *qualitative* sustainability education, the emphasis of the learning must also move away from facts and solutions based in *quantitative* technological fixes to discussions around the deeper values orienting society, giving rise to our unsustainable lifestyles in the first place. Echoing the wise words of the late Frank Fisher: '*we should not be so much seeking the technical solution to a problem but its social dissolution*'. As such, sustainability education needs to shift from being about *out there* where the polar ice caps are melting to *right here* in our hearts and minds, within our very *modus operandi*. The issues in sustainability are not in the environment (they never were), they are within us, and until we fix us, the way we see the world and our place in it, there is no fixing the planet.

'we don't see things as they are, we see things as we are' (Anais Nin)

Wonder must also be fostered in children *internally* and *externally*: the re-emergence of wonder for the world *around us* and the world *within us* is at the heart of transformative sustainable education. Therefore, the focus

is in *the process* of learning (qualitative) rather than the outcome (quantitative), and instilling wonder is the orienting principle of the process. Leave the re-discovery and 'sense of wonder' for the 'external' world up to Nature, as long as you readily grant the opportunities for students *to attend*, and inspire them to *long for* the endless immensity. However, igniting the wonder and impetus for the inner world of ourselves and what drives society is the great challenge, because of its confronting character in attempting to realign our lives. As educators in a time ripe for cultivating ecological intelligence, we must readily create the space for deeper questions and reflection to emerge to help draw attention to our largely unconscious mental maps, anchored in largely individualistic life-depreciating lifestyles.

'There is a close relationship between art and science. One concentrates on the beauty of truth, the other on the truth of beauty' (Roger Swainston)

And finally, the key invitation to qualitative learning is *creativity*. Creative exploration, creative expression and creative thinking with the vast environmental palette, are imperative for reconnecting to Nature and for visioning a better world. Sustainability education needs to be unlocked from the Sciences and freed to the Arts. Emotive learning, heartfelt discovery through accessing creativity in or about Nature, and stimulating creative ingenuity are the key to becoming re-enriched with the wondrous world and moving towards a more sustainable one. The world of unlimited magnificent shapes, colour, texture, and smells is at our fingertips, vibrant in being and

secrets of immaculate sustainable design, waiting to invite us back in and inspire new ideas for better living. Let us learn with the Earth, through the Earth, and celebrate the endless creativity around us and within us.

It is time for a giant leap from the current era of dominant *quantitative* living and learning, into an orientation of *qualitative* lifestyles and education, otherwise I fear we will be remiss in our responsibility as educators and citizens of our home, Earth. We must heed the call of this century and educate for an inspiring, immersive, wondrous, creative, internally and externally sustainable future ■

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