

# Why the Earth Charter Matters to (Multi)Cultural Educators Everywhere: A Rejoinder

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Bowers' and Stables' responses to "A Foucauldian Analysis of Environmental Education: Toward the Socioecological Challenge of the Earth Charter" could not have been more different. While Bowers analyzes, deepens, and extends arguments from the Foucauldian analysis, and helps to clarify the kind of cultural thinking all educators must undertake, Stables, in a seemingly ironic philosophical stance, questions whether, in a "postmodern" world, educators should bother to take theoretical and political stands at all. I will comment on both authors' contributions toward the end of this rejoinder. However, since neither author paid it much attention (Stables less than Bowers), I first want to return to the Earth Charter and update readers on the status of what Bowers in his response calls a "remarkable document" that "should be the basis of a transformative discourse" (p. 225). The Earth Charter, I wish to emphasize, represents a momentous, cross-cultural political achievement that can challenge the work of education (environmental or otherwise) in the Foucauldian tradition, and that can help bridge socially and ecologically critical perspectives toward culture and education.

## **GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION**

On September 4, 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, President Bush's emissary to the U.N. World Summit on Sustainable Development, "was booed and heckled as he spoke to the gathering, illustrating the disagreements and anti-American sentiment that lingered after the summit adopted a vaguely worded plan of action" (*Spokesman Review*, 2002). President Bush chose not to attend the meeting, though like the 1992 Earth Summit, which his father did attend, it was one

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of the largest gatherings of heads of state in human history. What meaning can be made of Bush's absence from this historic event? Moreover, what is the relationship between this particular absence and the anti-American sentiment that festers around the globe?

Bush's personal boycott of the World Summit on Sustainable Development was hardly surprising, and it signals a political stance that might serve to wake educators and philosophers out of their cultural and political sleepwalking. First, the United States has long treated U.N. resolutions with contempt and has a record of recognizing this world assembly only when it is economically, politically, and militarily expedient (Chomsky, 2002). The immediate issue at the summit, however, one that Bush had good reason to distance himself from, was that European nations and many developing countries have been angered by U.S. defiance of international resolve to take action to reduce the harmful effects of the industrial economy on human and nonhuman environments. In 2001, Bush made good his election promise not to seek U.S. ratification of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement to cut the production of "greenhouse gases" that are widely believed to be changing the Earth's climate. The official position of the Bush Administration is that the protocol, which many scientists and environmentalists claim is not nearly stringent enough, would be harmful to the U.S. economy.

The world leader in consumption, pollution, military spending, and economic disparities, the United States embodies the international, multicultural conflict between a national agenda for global economic, political, and military dominance, and a global vision for peace, environmental care, and social justice. Bush openly scorns international accords and gatherings convened to acknowledge and limit the negative consequences of economic development on human and nonhuman communities. For this the president makes no apologies: high energy consumption, he says, is the American way of life; the American way of life, Bush believes, is "a blessed one" (Fleisher [presidential spokesman], cited in *Newsweek*, 2001). Politically, then, Bush's absence from the World Summit was as predictable as the jeering, booing, and heckling Powell received in his stead. Whether Democrat or Republican, political leaders in the United States embrace policies of economic growth with religious zeal, and even aim to protect the national interests abroad with holy war (Chomsky, 2002). Bush may be an extreme case, but he follows a well-established, bipartisan record of promoting economic growth without limits (Daly, 1996), and of connecting the vision of global economic dominance to educational policy. Since the early 1980s, governmental leaders and educational policymakers have linked the rhetoric of education reform to the rhetoric of individualistic and nationalistic competition in the global economy (Spring, 1998). Thus, despite the good intentions of some educators, the underlying political purpose of education in the United States has been reduced to preparing youth for competition in the global economy, an economy that, in the eyes

of many international observers, is productive of social and ecological problems worldwide. In the language of the Earth Charter:

The Global Situation: The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable. (Earth Charter, 2001, Preamble)

Concerned that the World Summit, like the 1992 Earth Summit before it, might amount to little in terms of commitments toward more sustainable economics and more just communities, multicultural, international proponents of the Earth Charter had worked diligently for years to raise consciousness about the Charter's challenging social, political, economic, ecological, and educational vision, and to have the Charter officially adopted at the summit. Although there is evidence that many summit participants embraced the Charter, and that it significantly influenced the summit's official political declarations, "on the last day of the Summit the reference to the Earth Charter was deleted from the Political Declaration in closed-door negotiations" (Rockefeller, 2002).

In the end, the official Political Declaration avoided mentioning the Earth Charter because the ethical vision it represents too severely challenges the political and economic interests of powerful world leaders (the charter is now available in 31 languages at <http://www.earthcharter.org>). However, though the Charter was not officially adopted at the Summit in its final political declaration, the Earth Charter Initiative developed strong partnerships with education and community leaders worldwide: "The Statement of Education for Sustainable Development from representatives of National and Regional Professional Associations for Environmental Education with members in 73 countries and all continents declared: 'we support the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for sustainability'" (Rockefeller, 2002).

The potential adoption, official rejection, and continuing widespread support of the ethical framework of Earth Charter at the U.N. World Summit on Sustainable Development presents an interesting case of global environmental politics, and the relationship of these politics to national interests and to education. Analyzing global environmental politics helps to identify the role of environmental education in the United States today. Though the Earth Charter and its educational programs continue to inspire people (from a variety of cultures and epistemologies) on all continents to conceive of an education that would help promote peace, justice, and ecological care, in the U.S. educational system, the Charter, like the World Summit itself, is largely ignored.

## THE ENDURING STRENGTH OF DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

If, as Bowers points out, educators and students in the United States have a short attention span for the cultural politics of the Earth Charter, it is essential to analyze what they are focused on instead. Foucault's notion of disciplinary practice helps us understand how the subject of student and teacher attention gets constructed in a way that privileges certain forms of knowledge and that marginalizes, neglects, and disqualifies knowledges that are collectively deemed inappropriate or insufficient. A well-established dominant educational discourse exists in the United States that keeps schools, teachers, and students focused on disciplinary standards, "best practices," tests, and other competitions for educational and economic achievement. Far from enabling citizens from diverse communities to identify and appreciate cultural and biotic diversity locally and globally, current educational discourse (e.g., The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) assumes that the very practices that threaten this diversity—American-style capitalism—should be accelerated.

However, this does not mean that educators are unwilling or unable to critique the assumptions underlying their work. It means, rather, that through its regimes of control, the state has so effectively regulated what constitutes acceptable educational practice that dissenting voices have all but disappeared. Moreover, as I demonstrate with my discussion of disciplinary practice, groups in opposition to the shortcomings of American education (e.g., special educators, environmental educators, advocates for social justice), often adopt a strategy of framing their agendas in ways that reinforce, rather than problematize, the most troubling aspects of contemporary education.

As I have shown, the constitution and self-constitution of environmental education as a set of disciplinary practices that conform to the rules and regulations of general education works against the goals of environmental education to identify and transform socially and ecologically problematic cultural patterns. An examination of environmental education curricula—especially curricula produced by the largest and most influential EE organizations in the United States, including the North American Association of Environmental Education, Project Learning Tree, Project Wet, and Project Wild—reveals that in the pursuit of institutional legitimacy, environmental educators have framed their agenda not as a distinct, transformative educational program, but as a means of meeting state-mandated standards of achievement that remain unquestioned. Foucault's writings on the dynamics of power help us see that acts of legitimization (such as aligning EE curricula with national, state, and local standards in discrete content areas) exemplify how the norms and routines of institutional authority become internalized so the impact of power "is permanent in its effects," so that the actual exercise of power is rendered unnecessary (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

To the extent that environmental educators have internalized Foucault's (1977) panopticon, and have imposed on themselves a regime of self-surveillance, environmental education in the United States has been reduced to a set of innovative practices aimed to meet state learning, and thus state *political*, goals. The Earth Charter is important to environmental educators, and all educators, because it specifically challenges the dominant cultural patterns that spawn cultural and ecological problems and because it specifically articulates an oppositional ethical framework that challenges state policy.

It should be noted that environmental educators are not alone in confounding their own vision through the act of internalized surveillance. Educational advocates for equity and social justice face the same problem. In my own state of Washington, a multicultural, multiethnic think tank that includes such renowned multicultural educators as Geneva Gay (2000) has been working with the state to "close the achievement gap" for minority and poor students.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the think tank has adopted (perhaps in an attempt to co-opt it) the language of the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Targeting their campaign at colleges of teacher education, they want to ensure that teachers coming out of these institutions have developed "culturally responsive" teaching skills and practices so that "no child is left behind." The evidence they cite in their case against teachers includes the predictable test data that shows that poor and minority students consistently achieve well below their white, middle-class counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Though I fully support the goals of equity and social justice to which these educators are rightfully committed, and though I am in solidarity with their mission to transform an oppressive educational system, it needs to be pointed out how little these educators are actually challenging conventional educational and social practices, and how slick slogans to "leave no child behind"—absent a larger analysis of political economy and educational failure—may actually reinforce problematic assumptions about educational and social policy.

Just as a campaign to align EE curricula with state-mandated learning objectives reinforces the legitimacy of these objectives, a campaign to equalize test scores reinforces the legitimacy of an educational system defined by its tests. Instead of resisting the reduction of educational achievement to a highly dubious system of standards and testing, a system that predictably guarantees winners and losers, some educators for equity and social justice are reinforcing its legitimacy in their demands that it work better for "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995). As a white, male, lower-middle class heterosexual, I am wary that making this argument may be misunderstood as a racist insult to some multicultural educators working to better the lives of students from diverse cultural backgrounds within the existing educational system. Environmental educators committed to environmental care and ecological literacy may be similarly offended by the claim that aligning their practices with state-mandated standards works against creating an educational discourse that is culturally and eco-

logically transformative. My point is not that the work of these committed educators is wrongheaded and should be abandoned. My point is that attempting to construct a transformative discourse with *the most* problematic language, norms, assumptions, and routines of the dominant discourse practically guarantees that the transformative discourse will be absorbed, muted, and distorted. Concerning the goals of environmental and social justice educators, the point is that adjusting particular teaching practices to improve test scores does not constitute a movement for peace, justice, and environmental care—the specific goals of the Earth Charter. As multicultural educators undoubtedly know, it is not teachers alone who leave certain children behind, it is systems and institutions designed in the first place to sort, slot, and otherwise stage competitions of supposed merit for supposed economic and cultural rewards. As multicultural educators often proclaim in their effort to urge teachers toward more culturally sensitive teaching: “If we keep doing what we’ve always done, we’re going to keep getting what we’ve always got.”

For many multicultural educators, culturally responsive teaching means learning to understand and work with differences in race, class, ethnicity, gender, ability, and other cultural locations for the purpose of equalizing access to the educational, economic, and political reward system. Problematising this approach is not to claim that reforms such as these totally lack transformational potential, but to argue that they do not go nearly far enough toward identifying, naming, and seeking to transform the root causes of cultural, ecological, and educational problems. Indeed, like most theories and trends in education, much multicultural education is abstracted from a deep analysis of political economy and the larger landscape of cultural and ecological diversity that needs to inform educational theory and practice. Like Bowers’ (2001) discussion of problematic root metaphors reinforced by some critical pedagogies, Foucault’s notion of disciplinary practice helps to uncover the strategic inconsistencies, and institutional problematics, inherent in seeking to transform education without sufficiently interrogating core assumptions and practices. The multicultural, international Earth Charter lays out a clear, transformational ethical vision that can guide educators in the difficult work of digging deeper into our assumptions and envisioning an education for peace, justice, and ecological care.

## **ECOJUSTICE AND THE EARTH CHARTER**

Bowers has consistently sought to help educators understand the theoretical foundations of our work and how our assumptions about the legitimacy of educational practice are tied to deeper assumptions about the correctness of cultural patterns that are reproduced and reencoded through systems of thought, language, and education. His vast body of

work describing the connections and tensions among culture, language, environment, and education is the seminal contribution to understanding the nexus of educational, social, and ecological thought. His latest writing on “ecojjustice” (Bowers, 2001) lays foundation for an educational framework that can be responsive to the specific ethical challenges of the Earth Charter. His call to “reframe the social justice issues of class, race, and gender in ways that take account of traditions that are the sources of empowerment and moral reciprocity, and that have a smaller adverse ecological impact” and to “tak[e] seriously the ecological importance of conserving cultural diversity” (p. 231) pushes environmental, multicultural, and conventional education in new directions. Bowers provides a theory in which social justice and ecological issues must be understood together. However, the many tensions among the lived realities of racism, classism, urbanization, environmentalism, and local and global economic development still need to be identified and worked out as they are experienced in particular places. Bowers’s radical question—What needs to be conserved?—significantly challenges critical agendas for transformation. It remains to be seen, however, how this question might play out, for example, in economically, politically, and racially segregated urban environments where current economic development patterns continue to deepen the race–class divide. This does not mean to suggest that the question is insignificant to any advantaged or disadvantaged community, but to acknowledge that (1) people suffering the pain of oppression need a strategy for solidarity and institutional transformation, and (2) people with power and privilege tend to work to conserve that power and privilege.

While stating that the Earth Charter should be the basis of a transformative discourse, Bowers also attends to the “double binds” that could undermine the impact of the Charter. Chief among these, and a recurrent theme in Bowers’ work, is “the profound differences between . . . cultural knowledge systems” between “indigenous, ecologically centered cultures and cultures that are messianic and industrially oriented” (p. 225). Although people and groups with diverse cultural perspectives will undoubtedly respond to the Charter differently, it is important to point out that the Charter is the product of cross-cultural experience that included much interchange between these different cultural ways of knowing. Thus, while the Charter makes no claims to resolve the tensions between cultures and knowledge systems, its potential usefulness is to prompt this very conversation with respect to an interdependent global situation. Bowers is right that the issues of social justice, democracy, peace, and ecological care will be interpreted differently by different cultural groups. The potential of the Earth Charter, however, is not to create a global unified definition of these important themes; its potential, rather, lies in providing a scaffolding of language to bring these themes into the center of our political, social, economic, and educational discourses, dis-

courses that are currently dominated by disciplinary practices that explicitly enforce very different ends.

### **DOES THE WORLD NEED SAVING?**

In light of his complete retreat from substantive arguments about education, culture, or environmental education as disciplinary practice, and into the decontextualized “high ground” of comparative poststructuralist philosophy, it is hard to tell if Stables’s question—Can education save the world?—is a serious question or an ironic, condescending joke. Stables correctly identifies me as a critical realist (though if I must be labeled I prefer Cherryholmes’s (1988) description of “critical pragmatist”); I will, accordingly, take his question seriously and attempt to give it some context in addition to the background provided above.

Though clearly the practice of education often has unintended and even explicitly regretted consequences, education, I believe, will do largely what the institution of education is designed to do. Today, educational policy in the United States explicitly intends to prepare children and youth to compete for jobs and to work productively for the national economy in the global marketplace. It fulfills this intention with a variety of disciplinary practices that keep teachers and students focused on narrow definitions of achievement and accountability that are linked to increasing one’s capacity to produce, consume, and waste in the global economy, while simultaneously limiting exposure to critical perspectives that resist the instrumentality of educational policy and question the political goals of consumerism and nation building. Further, as Bowers points out, these disciplinary practices deny students and teachers opportunities to experience and reflect on other cultural ways of being and knowing. Pointing out that our economic and political institutions are problematic for cultures and ecosystems is not a blanket rejection of capitalism, but a gesture toward analyzing the cultural and ecological contexts of education and toward formulating a vision that takes the status of cultural and ecological systems as seriously as we now take the GNP. In response to Stables’s question: I’m not sure if the world can be saved from its own institutions, but I’m willing to say that aspects of the social and educational institutions that form the backdrop of my very real cultural experience are particularly troubling to me and, further, that they compel me on moral, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual grounds to desire and work for change. The Earth Charter, which Stables too quickly and unconvincingly rejects as foundationalist, is an expression of ethical commitments that I would like to see educators struggle over as they make realist decisions about how to live and work.

Stables wonders if education can save the world, but he does not reveal whether he believes the world needs to be saved. To do so, of course, would require taking a concrete theoretical, ethical, or political position, which

Stables refuses to do. If there are problems in the world and in our communities, then people need to be prepared to analyze and solve them. It does little good to point out that people, or philosophical traditions, often see problems differently and just leave it at that.

In the United States, the field of education is currently held hostage by national, state, and local agendas for accountability that severely limit the scope and depth of political, cultural, and ecological inquiry. At this historical moment—in the age of globalization, with cultures and ecosystems under siege, where education is increasingly coming under state control while the drumbeat of war looms large—the Earth Charter offers educators on all continents an ethical framework of great substance. It is a framework that emerged from a multinational, multiethnic, multicultural chorus of concern for difference and interrelationship, a framework that is unabashedly oppositional and transformational, a framework that provides direction for the political, cultural, intellectual, community, ecological, and even the spiritual work that all educators must do.

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## NOTES

1. "Closing the Achievement Gap: Implementing the Pedagogy Assessment Instrument" was a conference for teacher education faculty convened by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Washington Association of Colleges of Teacher Education at the University of Washington on November 15, 2002. Here, the multiethnic think tank exhorted teacher educators to train teachers for culturally responsive teaching so that NO child would be left behind.
2. These disparities, as well as those that measure economic advantage, have persisted before and since Bowles and Gintis (1976) published their classic, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

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