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The Earth Charter in Action: Experiences and Perspectives for Education in Values in Mexico



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In Mexico, substantial progress has been made since the Earth Charter was launched. Numerous institutions and organizations have signed it and are involved in working programs to adopt it as a basic moral code. Many organizations of environmental educators have made an open commitment, but such is not the case of the broad community of education professionals, especially teachers. Therefore, there has been slow, but eventful, progress in the application of the Earth Charter as a well-defined part of the educational materials used throughout the school system.

Numerous intensive courses have been given by teachers in a growing number of states in the country, and versions suitable for young people and children have been written. Of course, the dynamism of the National Committee has played a part. For example, on a national level we have managed to have the Earth Charter included in several teacher training refresher course programs offered to elementary school teachers. Specifically, the principles of Part II, Ecological Integrity, form an

important part of a module on biodiversity in the general course “The environmental problem from the school and the classroom”.¹ Furthermore, the Earth Charter has been worked into the Science and Technology Program² as well as Civil and Ethics Education in the new secondary education syllabus. But, this is insufficient; more solid and consistent progress is required. We are working on the definition of a strategy to begin to raise the awareness of education specialists in values with respect to the Earth Charter. In our judgment, this is the most effective way of giving the Earth Charter the impulse we seek.

In an extremely short time, education in values has undergone radical changes in the context of Mexican elementary education. Two decades ago, the approach taken in civic education was still, from an excessively normative and prescriptive standpoint, terribly removed from the many problems affecting children. The program focused on the communication of a set of behavioral norms based on conventionally-accepted wisdom taught in a terribly boring way. Because of the teaching methodology used, and the fact that there was no text book, the subject slowly lost its relative weighting within the school syllabus and the course content received occasional, unsystematic treatment. The teaching of values has been constantly deemphasized in elementary schooling with the result that nowadays children are capable of processing huge amounts of information and understanding the underlying logic in a computer program almost instantaneously, but they are not so quick to pick up on the implications that this newly acquired information has for their own lives.

However, each historical moment has its own characteristics and the time that it has been our fortune to live in is, among many other things, a moment of crisis; one of the many crises that have recurred with such frequency that they have become almost permanent—environmental crises, economic crises, and assuredly, crises of values. The change of millennium has forced us, as humankind, to face a dark image of ourselves, an image that reveals us to ourselves as half-empty, lacking discourse of possibility or hope, and without direction and a sense of the future. Some of the utopias of yore have become reality and have revealed their limitations.

The numerous current problems and our perception of ourselves have once again given the issue of values importance in educational systems, but this time from a different perspective – one more in touch with the complexity of our times, thereby recovering human rights; respect for differences; multi-cultural aspects; democracy; gender; artistic appreciation; the preservation of environmental quality; and the defense of life, among many other issues left behind by the civilization of the modern world. What is now under discussion is the education of a citizenry capable of living together and showing solidarity and respect for each other's individuality. However, it is apparent that this perspective is still too fragmented; it has not managed to find a way of coordinating issues which, although independently dealt with by individual initiatives and social movements, are nonetheless closely related.

Values are grouped in complex codes, variously, and even contradictorily, linked on various levels; but these, in one way or another, indicate the profile of the person that one wishes to become, which is to say a somewhat improved version of oneself. But these codes are shifting structures which are realigned through experience and the social practices in which we, as individuals, engage. Today we observe very rapid changes in this realignment of identities and subjectivities; people no longer make definitive, permanent commitments even in their affective lives, and far less with regard to membership of political or social militancy groups. On the contrary, a wide spectrum of blurred, shifting interests is apparent, especially among young people, causing them to jump rapidly from one commitment to another in a process that some writers (Arditi, 2000) have called nomadic or "intermittent intervention."

This makes it very difficult to teach values; although we have to recognize that, at the end of the day, all school programs have an implicit moral code, manifest or otherwise, which achieves full expression throughout the entire education establishment³ and in the set of school rituals and teaching practices. In this sense, the Earth Charter is revealed as a timely proposal for the articulation, in terms of four basic principles, of some of the major issues of our times. However, methodological and didactic problems persist, especially considering the nature of the institutional environment in which we operate and the weakening of stable identities.

One proposal that we are looking into with a view to complementing the work done of those whose research into education in values is to use the dramatic effect of the cinema for the analysis of some of the Earth Charter's contents. The idea is to make use of the large number of topics dealing with the four Parts of the Earth Charter already available in world cinema in order to intensify the learning experience by provoking strong emotions when interpreting the message. The debate's importance lies neither in convincing nor in negotiating interpretations, but in giving free rein to subjectivity when exposed to an aesthetic experience that consists of reconfiguring one's own experience.⁴

The importance of using aesthetic experience for teaching is that it detaches our entrenched individual referents and uproots us; in other words, it dislocates the discourses that have become part of our nature by questioning their certainty and their perceptive matrix, which is a basic consideration for getting in touch with values. On this subject, Gianni Vattimo (2000, 21) states: "The aesthetic experience gives us a view of other possible worlds, and in so doing reveals the relative contingency and the undefined character of the 'real' world to which we have limited ourselves."

Finally, we seek to take advantage of the deep meaning of the Earth Charter by transcending conventional pedagogic activities, not with a view to supplying more information or getting involved in some fun activities – not a bad idea in itself – but principally to try to dissolve the unfortunate, protective shell that the process of modern civilization has burdened us with, making us more and more insensitive, and less and less sympathetic, to the whole of life's value and beauty. ●

References

- Ortigosa L., S. (2002). Education in values through the cinema and the arts. In the *Ibero-American Education Journal No. 29*. OEI (May-August)
- Vattimo, G. (2000). Postmodern: A transparent society? In Arditi, B. *The opposite of the difference. Identity and politics*. Caracas, Nueva Sociedad.

Notes

- 1 The general courses are intensive, 40 hours in length, and are taken by teachers between academic cycles. They usually have credit value as a teacher training course.
- 2 The science and technology program is responsible for the physics, chemistry, and biology course materials in the basic education syllabus.
- 3 This includes the sciences, which claim objectivity.
- 4 Different didactic techniques have been used to this end, such as role playing, team teaching, etc.