Public Education and a Responsible Sustainability Disposition

Sonja Darlington, Beloit College

In the summer 2009 *Harvard Educational Review (HER)*, an issue in which 47 educational experts debated the potential of the Obama presidency to affect education in dramatically new ways, critic Henry Giroux pointed out that Obama and his instrumentalist view of education tended to gloss over philosophers such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, W.E. B. Dubois, and Jane Addams, "who valued education as a preeminent force for preparing young people to be socially responsible, critically engaged citizens in a democratic society" (258). Yet, Giroux, like other educational experts, in the volume including Linda Darling-Hammond, overlooked what a growing number of concerned citizens believe is public education's most pressing need: to educate American young people to live in ways that contribute to earth's sustainability. Among the topics that the experts addressed were urban school reform, integration of "non-white" communities, and the high rte of child poverty. Yet, the issue that will affect all learners, whether publically or privately educated, is whether a future will exist for the coming generations and if so for how long. If the predictions of thinkers, such as Jared Diamond and Joseph Tainter for a societal collapse, due to increasing complexities with economic, political and social systems, are to be taken seriously, as many believe, then the need for environmental education ought to be part of public education and every single teacher's curriculum, whether implicit or explicit.

To this end, in spring 2009, I had all my students in a course called "Alternative Education Perspectives" read David Orr's *Earth in Mind*, so that we could discuss together the topic I designated as " Considering Education and the Planetary Emergency." The question that became central to the course was whether students actually believed there was a planetary emergency, and if so, what where they going to about it collectively and personally. Twenty-six students were in the course and at the beginning I asked them what preparation they had had in their previous schooling that would help them to accept a world with limited resources. In the group at least three students had had a memorable experience in a high school science class, so that they were aware in general terms of the precarious predicament of the earth's environment. Another five students, had had what they termed an" inspiring" teacher who taught them to appreciate the natural environment, and so they acknowledged the importance of the earth as an interdependent living organism. Another third of the class, could remember a class with an emphasis on something related to the environment, and while the memory might have been pleasant, the experience did not have much effect on their present way of living. Finally, another third stated that their educational experience thus far had not really dealt with an environmental component that influenced them in any sense.

To my mind the result of our discussions on alternative education perspectives, which included presentations on open, free, essential, charter, magnet, and home schools; other discussion topics, e.g., Dewey's progressive education, immigration and the educational environment, religious schooling alternatives, and the cost of integration in American schools; class visits to a Montessori, Waldorf, an Open School, and an Environmental Center; and the reading of Orr's text as one of eight texts for the course, did not bring about the kind of environmental awareness that I had hoped. Certainly by the end of the semester, more students claimed that they saw the importance of sustainability, but on the last day of class when I went around the room and asked students again if they considered that there was a planetary emergency, I was disappointed. Like the experts in *HER*, too many students found that, among the crises in the world, sustainability was less critical than the issues of poverty, racial integration, and personal economic gain. Although I had at least two students who were very committed to sustainability and very ably argued for a higher level of awareness and individual responsibility, I could not help but acknowledge that this one course probably did not change the deeper attitudes that most students held about the environment prior to taking this course.

This latest attempt of mine to try to impress upon students, many future teachers among them, that the earth and societies who depend on her are vulnerable, reminds me of the critical importance for

public education to prepare "socially responsible, critically engaged citizens." Therefore, when I read James Farrell's The *Nature of College: College Culture, Consumer Culture and the Environment,* I could not but cheer when he argues that college students need to be strongly encouraged to "wake up to responsibility" (20). His book is a forceful and hopefully convincing argument that students need to become more mindful by examining personal habits and learn, as he says, "to live in the earth's cycles and rhythms, not just as consumers of ecosystem services, but as sources of generative design as well" (21). While in a course, which serves as the gateway to an education major, the entire curriculum may not be just about sustainability, it can serve as a catalyst to examine other philosophical, historical and social issues through a question as basic as is there a planetary emergency. And, while I would love for students to be engaged with poets such as Wendell Barry or Gary Snyder, environmental educators such as C.A. Bowers or David Orr, and international development educators such as Vandana Shiva, I aim for educating future teachers in an introductory course about their dispositions regarding a life lived in a sustainable environment.

In other attempts to educate for socially responsible, engaged citizens, I have been inspired to work with students on projects, such as supporting an initiative to start a food cooperative on the Beloit College campus, lead a field trip to Maharishi University for a sustainability conversation, direct a special project on the organic agriculture in Rudolf Steiner's texts, attend lectures by David Orr and Vandana Shiva, and I continue to probe students' attitudes regarding sustainability. Moreover, contemplating the importance of sustainability led me to recall an earlier initiative with sustainability in a First Year Initiative course entitled "Agrarian Perspectives in African novels and Contemporary African Economic Policies," which I taught in 2006. In this course, the students read Bessie Head's *When Rain Cloud Gather*, Chenjerai Hove's *Shadows*, Ngugi wa Thiogo's *The River Between*, and Niyi's Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*. Our primary purpose was to consider the issues of land use, land rights, cash crops, and sustainability where there is extreme pressure for "development," e.g. Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. Aside from discussing the implications of sustainability in these countries and in the above-mentioned texts, the course involved guest speakers related to the course topic, a visit to an organic farm, and written responses that were later used in an article published in two journals (see "The Significance of Bessie Head's Response to 'The Call of the Global Green.'" I presented this paper in Gaborone, Botswana at the International Symposium on Bessie Head as well. My impetus was to engage in a dialogue about the inclusion of Black African writers into the world literary tradition of writing about nature and the environment. But, this digresses, and so I want to return to my initial point that public education must address sustainability in as many curricular ways as possible and most importantly that teachers need to model a responsible sustainability disposition.

Works Cited

Darlington, Sonja. (2008). "The Call of the Global Green," *The Life and Work of Bessie Head*. Eds. Mary Lederer, Tumedi, Seatholo, Molema, Leloba and Daymond. M.J. Gaborone, Botswana: Pentagon Publishers, 46-58.

Farrell, James. (2010).*The Nature of College: College Culture, Consumer Culture and the Environment*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Giroux, Henry. (2009). "Obama's Dilemma: Postpartisan Politics and the Crisis of American Education *Harvard Educational Review*. (2009) Vol. 79, No. 2. Summer, 250-266.

Head, Bessie. (1969, 1986). *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hove, Chenjerai. (1988, 1991). *Shadows*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ngugi wa Thiongo, (1965). *The River Between*. 1965.

Orr, David. (2004). *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*. Washington: Island Press.

Osundare, Niyi. (1986). *The Eye of the Earth*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann.