

Ontario's Policy Framework for Environmental Education: Indoctrination and Integration

By Bruce Pardy

Outdoor educators should find little to like in the Ontario government's new policy framework for environmental education. Released in February 2009, the document, titled *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow*, relies heavily on the 2007 Report of the Working Group on Environmental Education in Ontario, *Shaping Our Schools, Shaping Our Future*, also known as "The Bondar Report."

The policy framework has two main flaws: The first is its plan to program children to believe in a particular version of environmental stewardship, and the second is its intent to integrate environmental education into existing curriculum.

Environmental Indoctrination

Back in 1968, George Leonard wrote, "To learn is to change. Education is a process that changes the learner. . . . The task of preventing the new generation from changing in any deep or significant way is precisely what most societies require of their educators" (p. 7). As originally conceived, public schools sought to produce conformity rather than independence.

According to Alvin Toffler,

Built on the factory model, mass education taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, a bit of history and other subjects. This was the "overt curriculum." But beneath it lay an invisible or "covert curriculum" that was far more basic. It consisted — and still does in most industrial nations — of three courses: one in punctuality, one in obedience, and one in rote, repetitive work. (1980, p. 29)

It is difficult to find many modern examples of genuine divergence from this pattern. Ontario's new policy framework for environmental education is not one of them.

Rather than seeking to develop independent thinking about environmental issues, the

framework's primary objective is to instill orthodox environmental values. *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow* states, "Ontario's education system will prepare students with the knowledge, skills, perspectives and practices they need to be environmentally responsible citizens" (p. 4). It does not acknowledge that the meaning of environmental responsibility is a matter of opinion and debate. Instead of teaching skills and perspectives that would equip students to critically assess environmental claims and work out their own conclusions, the document promises that the curriculum will "[i]ncrease student knowledge and develop skills and perspectives that foster environmental stewardship" (p. 12). It adopts the view that the solution to environmental problems lies within the realm of individual activism.

The policy framework seeks to move beyond a focus on symptoms — air and water pollution, for example — to encompass the underlying causes of environmental stresses, which are rooted in personal and social values It seeks to promote changes in personal behaviour. (p. 4)

Schools will do this by having students "take a message home and teach his or her family about recycling," "by getting involved in water conservation in the community," and by integrating "environmental education across the curriculum . . . such as recycled-art shows" (p. 9).

This approach reflects a trite, simplistic, unsophisticated treatment of environmental issues that makes children into morally righteous robots wedded to platitudes. Genuine environmental education requires scepticism and hard questions. Instead of developing analytical skills to distinguish between genuine environmental problems and moralistic hand-wringing, the framework seeks to condition children to believe in the version of environmental stewardship that society currently endorses.

Integration

The policy framework seeks to "integrate environmental education into subject-specific training activities" (p. 13). In other words, environmental education is to be inserted into existing classes. Grant Clarke, an assistant deputy minister in the Ministry's strategic planning and elementary/secondary programs, has explained: "In math, a teacher can use problems related to environmental issues such as water flow or pollution measurement And in English, one does not have to look far to find stories and poems with environmental themes" (p. 37). Reading stories and doing math problems is the government's new vision for environmental education.

The document defines environmental education as "education for the environment, about the environment and in the environment . . ." (p. 4). This sentence is as banal as they come. It is interesting only for what it omits: environmental education, apparently, is not education from the environment, which is the business that outdoor educators are in. Instead, environmental education is a "deliverable," to be provided within the four square walls of a classroom, an environment that teaches a covert curriculum: children belong inside, sitting down, being still. The students' role is to respond to instructions, not to explore but to receive what is delivered to them. The policy framework does not apply the values of outdoor education. It does not say, "Turn off the computer and go outside." Under the framework, environmental education means merely tweaking the subject of student activity rather than its substance.

The policy framework reflects a shallow vision of environmental education. It provides curriculum about environmental topics in place of direct immersion in the natural world. Ivan Illich diagnosed a similar pattern 40 years ago, when he wrote about confusing institutional programs with genuine experience:

The pupil is "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical

treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. (1973, p. 9)

Public education is compulsory. In Ontario, section 21(1) of the Education Act provides that every child between the ages of six and 18 shall attend elementary or secondary school on every school day of the year. Even children who attend private school or are home schooled require the approval of the Ministry of Education. In a compulsory system, educational policy is the government's statement of what children will learn. It is both coercive and political. Educational policy is not merely a statement of preference or recommendation, but a command to its teachers and a message to the public. The message of this policy framework is that schools will imbue children with conformist environmental beliefs and keep curriculum basically the same.

References

- Benedict, M. (2009). Environmental education. *Professionally Speaking*, 13(3). Retrieved from http://www.oct.ca/publications/professionally_speaking/june_2009/
- Illich, I. (1973). *Deschooling society*. London: Calder & Boyars.
- Leonard, G. (1968). *Education and ecstasy*. New York: Viking.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Acting today, shaping tomorrow: A policy framework for environmental education in Ontario schools*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/curriculumcouncil/ShapeTomorrow.pdf>
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The third wave*. New York: William Morrow.

Bruce Pardy is a professor in the Faculty of Law at Queen's University.