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Environmental Education in Greece

EUGÉNIE FLOGAITIS & IOANNA ALEXOPOULOU

Environmental education (EE) is a product of the heightened awareness of environmental problems which emerged during the 1960s. However, it was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) which set the ball rolling when it pronounced a need for EE in order to combat the worldwide environmental crisis. In response to the Conference's recommendations in 1975 Unesco, with the co-operation of UNEP, launched an international EE programme (IEEP) which began at the Belgrade workshop (1975), continued with a series of regional meetings all over the world, and culminated in the inter-governmental conference at Tbilisi. Thus the nature, aims, objectives and characteristics of EE were set out, as well as the pedagogical principles and guidelines which would govern research into the development of concepts and methodological approaches (Unesco, 1978, 1980). It was against this background that various pilot schemes and experiments were set up around the world in order to develop EE and incorporate it into the various educational systems (Unesco, 1977-81).

Greece was relatively late in following the example of other countries. This was due, among other things, to the fact that its serious environmental problems arose around the end of the 1970s (Spyropoulos, 1986). At this point the importance of EE was realised and initiatives were taken in this sector. Fourteen years have now gone by since the first projects and 11 since their experimental application in primary and secondary schools.

The First Stages of the Development of EE in Greece

In 1977 the General Secretariat for Regional Planning and the Environment, in co-operation with KEME (Centre for Pedagogical Studies and Teacher Training), formed an interdisciplinary working party which in tandem with competent organisations such as the Council of Europe, Unesco and the European Commission started work on planning the introduction and development of EE within the Greek educational system. As a result of this work a document was produced illustrating the need to develop EE in Greek schools as well as making suggestions on how to infuse it into the curricula of primary and secondary schools by means of thematically linked subjects (National Council for Planning and Environment, 1977).

One of the first aims was the training of a certain number of instructors who would form a nucleus for the communication of both the meaning and methodology of EE within the school system. Thus in 1980, in co-operation with the European Commission for the Protection of Nature of the Council of Europe, the first EE seminar was organised in Athens. Experts from the Council of Europe trained and set up a staff of

40 people taken from among teachers with various specialisms and arranged an exhibition of relevant printed material and audio-visual aids.

Subsequently, as part of the common action taken in the scientific field by the member states of the Council of Europe, 24 teachers went on environmental education training courses organised by the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe held in Environment Initiation Centres (CPIE) in France between 1980 and 1983.

In the meantime experimental EE programmes were set up for the first time in schools. In 1982/83 four Greek schools made their first attempt at participating in an environmental education project which centred around a Council of Europe campaign for the protection of the seashores (Gardeli, 1983).

In 1982 two schools were nominated pilot schools within the framework of the European Community's Environmental Education Network and during the three-year period in which the network was in operation, they studied various topics (Gardeli, 1986) and took part in the network's annual conferences, the most recent of which took place in Athens in 1986.

During the same period those teachers who had taken part in seminars or had participated in pilot schemes tried to foster a better understanding of EE through conferences and articles in newspapers and magazines.

Despite a favourable attitude on the part of the Greek Ministry of Education, nothing official was decided during this period; nevertheless the work carried out in the field of EE in this preparatory phase helped define the strategies to be followed in its future development.

Attempts to Incorporate EE into the Educational System

In 1983 as a result of a decision taken by the Ministry of Education an official committee made up of trained instructors was formed at KEME in order to promote the introduction of EE into school curricula and the training of staff. At the same time an office at the Education Department's secondary education division took charge of all topics related to EE. Since 1987, however, responsibility for the development of EE in Greek schools has resided exclusively with the primary and secondary divisions of the Education Department and a relevant records department and library has been set up. Thus, since 1981 when the Ministry of Education took over the task of EE, efforts have been made to incorporate it into the Greek educational system.

Since the whole point was to avoid turning EE into a new discipline an attempt was made on the one hand to introduce environment-related topics into traditional subject areas and on the other to set up interdisciplinary projects in EE in schools.

So as far as the compiling of new textbooks is concerned, basic ecological concepts were taken into account and topics relating to the environment were included above all as regards biology, geography and literature, at the secondary level, and in 'The Study of the Environment' at primary level. Contemporaneously a series of brochures translated from French and dealing with the environment were distributed in junior and senior high schools [1].

As regards interdisciplinary projects an attempt was made to organise them on an experimental basis in as many schools as possible throughout the country with the exception of those pilot schools where they had already been started up.

For this reason, since 1984, every year at the beginning of the school year a circular is sent to all Greek schools encouraging teachers to start work on projects. The circular includes: information on EE; the possibilities of development of projects within the

curriculum; general instructions for the realization of projects as well as a pre-printed module on which they can outline their proposed project. In this way an interdisciplinary team of teachers can choose a topic and create a project for which, if approved by the Ministry, the school will receive a small sum of money in funding. These projects obviously have to be done outside normal school hours since no official time-slots exist for them at present in school programmes. In order to help teachers with this activity a small booklet (Alexopoulou & Glavas, 1989) has been published and distributed to schools by the Ministry. To date, projects from 600 secondary schools and 1500 primary schools have been carried out, corresponding to 19% and 20% respectively of the total number.

Besides the projects carried out in schools, a very limited number of one-week projects have also been arranged for students to go on trips to parts of Greece where there are plans to set up Centres for environmental education in the future.

During this time efforts have also been made to provide training for teachers in EE. Twenty seminars lasting from two to ten days were organised in various regions of Greece by the National Education Ministry or in collaboration with other ministries, local authorities or Prefectures. EE has also been introduced into pre-service and in-service teacher training courses. A total of 7500 instructors (8%) have been trained.

The decisive step in the development of EE in Greece was, however, its recent legal authorisation by law 1982 of 13 July 1990 according to which EE constitutes a part of the primary and secondary school curriculum. EE aims to make students aware of the relationship existing between Man and Nature and the social environment in which he lives, to make him sensitive to the problems connected to this and to allow him by means of specific programmes to play his own part in the general effort to deal with the problem.

The same law foresees the legal provision of EE staff positions and the setting up of Centres for Environmental Education. Primary and secondary school teachers have thus already been nominated for EE posts in all the prefectures of Greece, having successfully completed a training seminar organised in collaboration with Unesco.

Co-operation between the Various Ministries and Other Bodies

For the development of EE in Greece the Ministry of National Education receives support from all those ministerial or other departments which are involved with the environment. In order to co-ordinate the action taken on environmental education by the various ministries, an inter-ministerial working group has been formed. In particular, co-operation takes place with the Ministry of the Environment Regional Planning and Public Works, the Ministry for Youth and Sports, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Co-operation with this latter in particular has resulted in a protocol agreement signed in 1986 guaranteeing between 1987 and 1989 the nomination of a person responsible for the forestry sector in each prefecture of Greece, whose task will be to promote those activities which will acquaint students with the problems of the protection of the forest.

The Ministry of Education has also initiated co-operation with non-government agencies competent in environmental matters: the Greek Society of Environmental Education and Information, the Greek Society for the Protection of the Environment and Cultural Inheritance, the Association for the Protection of the Sea Turtle, the Ornithological Society, Helmepea (Union for the Protection of the Marine Environ-

ment), the Greek Union of Aluminium and the WWF. This co-operation is of great help above all in the production of written and audio-visual material for EE.

As already mentioned, Greece has worked in co-operation at various levels with the EEC, the Council of Europe and Unesco. At the present time it is participating in the EEC Arion Project and the Unesco network of co-operating schools in order to exchange information and experiences.

Difficulties and Future Prospects

The experience gained over the last decade with the experimental application of interdisciplinary environmental education projects in Greek schools has brought to light a series of problems which constitute obstacles to be surmounted if EE is to be provided. These obstacles crop up in various sectors.

The first is the structure and the functioning of the Greek education system, which is extremely centralised with a compulsory unified programme for all the schools in the country. The curriculum is an extremely dense and inflexible one based on rigid compartmentalisation of subject areas; it has a strictly regulated timetable in a school framework which is an isolated entity. It thus effectively stifles any initiative and does not offer the possibility of applying new methods.

It is obvious that all these characteristics constitute great obstacles to the innovative nature of EE because of both the interdisciplinary nature of the activities imposed by its methodology and also the specificity of its aims, which call into question the traditional features of knowledge and the whole system of values in present-day society of which the school is part. Thus the teachers are called upon to face these conceptual and structural difficulties which endure within the education system in order to organise and realise interdisciplinary projects compatible with the aims of EE within the school framework. In order to do this they must dedicate some of their spare time, given the total absence of slots in the school timetable for such activities, and they must take on an often hostile administrative staff, who are not even willing to facilitate the funding (which in any case is not adequate), although they themselves are not convinced of the necessity of the task before them. It seems that most teachers do not perceive EE as relevant to their own situation, given the very small percentage of teachers who have actually taken part in the training seminars.

But even those teachers who did receive training, who are involved and who are willing to take on all these problems and participate in projects, very often have a rather confused and undefined idea of what they have to do, from the choice of the topic to be dealt with to the appropriate methodology to be followed. Here then the problem of training is defined for us not only at a quantitative but also at a qualitative level.

To all that must be added another significant obstacle, which is the almost total lack of printed, audio-visual and in general didactic material in the Greek language. This deficiency is exacerbated by the insufficient diffusion of information regarding what experience has already been gained and generally the absence of an exchange system between teachers.

Because of the insufficient training and the difficulties which arise, the development of EE meets with a certain, often justified, reticence on the part of the teachers, but it also comes up against the apathy of parents and the authorities, particularly the local ones, who do not understand the necessity for this innovation. Moreover, it often

clashes with the aspirations of the students themselves, who are trapped in an examination system which, as we know, is based on the acquisition of knowledge and not on the moulding of attitudes.

Despite all these obstacles the number of projects carried out is quite high. It remains to be seen, however, if these projects are in conformity not only with the methodology but also with the objectives of EE. Deviations can in fact occur, as for example in considering EE more as an educational innovation at the methodological level or persisting in a purely naturalist approach. In both cases the fact that EE aims essentially to modify attitudes and behaviour patterns and in that sense constitutes an authentic "civic education" (Giordan & Souchon, 1991) is not taken into account.

With regard to evaluation in the short and medium term, it can be noted that the problem has not yet been tackled.

These problems are linked to insufficient training but also to insufficient monitoring of the projects, due to the fact that responsibility for this is centralised within the Ministry of Education in Athens.

The institutionalisation of EE paves the way to removing various obstacles and opens up new prospects for its development. Firstly, it proves the effective existence of a political will to develop this sector. It should be pointed out that Greece is one of the first countries to have institutionalised EE. Indeed for this reason, in Geneva, the second preparatory commission for the World Conference on the Environment and Development (which will take place in Brazil in 1991) allocated Greece a prominent place in EE. With law 1982 of 31 July 1990, therefore, despite the fact that for the moment it resolves only administrative and financial problems connected with the realisation of the projects, EE ceases to be an amateur and optional component within the education system and actually becomes a proper part of the school curriculum.

In addition, the legal appointment of people responsible for EE decentralises all the procedures connected with the application of EE in schools and promotes the co-ordination of activities and the carrying out of projects in the schools of the prefecture. This will also improve the organisation of training and of EE centres, which will provide necessary but at present non-existent reception centres, as well as research and training centres.

Institutionalisation is most certainly a decisive step in the development of EE in Greece, but the prospects for complete inclusion in the education system depend upon a solution to the aforementioned problems being found. Thus many basic areas still need to be dealt with, such as the restructuring of the curricula and the setting up of timetable slots for the interdisciplinary activities of EE; the infusion of EE into the traditional subject areas of the curriculum, which is at present totally inadequate; the production of appropriate didactic material and the creation of a communication system between teachers (in this respect it must be said that an EE teachers' handbook is at present being prepared in collaboration with Unesco). A well-designed and effective training for teachers must be devised in conformity with the objectives and methodology of EE. This latter is a crucial feature with regard to its application in schools.

Of course in order to face these problems effectively, apart from the political will, the development of research and educational experimentation in this field is necessary in order to give support and direction to a national EE programme. In this sense new horizons are indeed opening up with the recent creation in Greek universities of departments of education, pre-school education and elementary school education which have already included EE among the programmes they offer.

Conclusions

EE has started to become a reality in Greece. Its incorporation into the educational system has still to be effected, but this may happen quite soon because, although many problems exist, there is also a will to find a solution to them.

At the moment all the various experiments in EE are connected with the school sector and in particular primary and secondary school education. It is therefore time to think about its development at pre-school level, at nursery school, a sector which up till now has been rather neglected. It goes without saying, however, that it is a very important one, if we consider that it is never too early to form habits and create behaviour patterns (Giolitto, 1982).

It is also never too late to start learning—which is why EE must gain ground in the universities and technical and vocationally-oriented courses too, and in particular those courses which have a professional link with the environment.

Never before has the environmental crisis seemed so grave and therefore never before has it been so imperative to respond to this with the development of EE within the education system. It is thus necessary to “carry out training in environmental matters at various levels of those human resources which are necessary for the rational management of the environment within the perspective of a lasting development at community, national, regional and international level” (Unesco-UNEP, 1988).

NOTE

- [1] *L'Homme et l'Environnement*, originally published in 1982 by the French Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale.

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