

## Integrated Curricula and Cultural Change: A Question of Why?

By Sean Blenkinsop

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to describe a large research project, which has integrated curricula and is currently emerging as a publicly funded K–7 place-based, imaginative and ecological learning centre in Maple Ridge, BC; second, to spend some time exploring more deeply the theoretical implications of the project and why integrated curricula are necessary. So, to begin. . . .

### Situating This Research Project

In February of 2010 the Community University Research Alliance (special Environmental Call), a branch of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, agreed to fund our research project:<sup>i</sup> *Aligning Education and Sustainability in Maple Ridge, BC: A Study of Place-Based Ecological Schooling*. In November the board of trustees of School District 42 voted unanimously to go ahead with the project. To date we have just completed our initial registration,<sup>ii</sup> and the “school” will open in September of 2011 with two or three “classes”.<sup>iii</sup> To provide a context for the later discussion, I include here two passages from our original submission.

### From the Summary of Proposed Research

Public education systems, across the industrialized world, tend to be isolated from local processes of knowledge-building, planning and decision-making for sustainability. . . . Environmental education programs are rarely integrated with the mainstream curriculum, are typically of short duration, often lack theoretical or methodological sophistication and show little compelling evidence of having long-term effects on most students’ thinking about or engagement with diverse others including the natural world. . . . Taking this local vision as a starting point, the local school district and researchers in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU) will work together with the municipality to develop an environmental school and learning centre in which learning across the curriculum is tied to the growth of environmental awareness, engagement with the natural world and community sustainability (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2009).

### And, Further, from the Statement of Relevance

Many of the practices of schools (and other learning institutions) reduce learners’



contact with the natural world, focus their awareness away from the local and particular and place them in an essentially passive relationship with knowledge. A sustainability mandate, on the other hand, might emphasize developing direct knowledge of the environment, focusing on the specifics of place and community and linking understanding to action.

These contrasts hint at the extent of the transformation that may be required to align public schooling with our developing understanding of sustainability at the local and regional levels. Environmental education in schools is currently limited in all kinds of ways—by the curriculum, by the nature of teacher preparation, by the expectations of parents and, most of all, by a culture of schooling that has always been closely tied to the beliefs and values of the industrial era.

One potentially fruitful approach to developing a deeper understanding of this problem, and of what might be needed to resolve it, is, therefore, to study the development of a public school expressly aligned with local environmental management and planning for sustainability. Such research, as outlined in this proposal, will be long term and collaborative, and address not only issues of curriculum and pedagogy but also school administration, school–community relationships, teacher development, learning outcomes and social impact (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2009).

As seen in these descriptions, this project, at its depth, is interested in the process of cultural change and the role education can potentially play therein. How might public education change if generated through an ecological rather than modernist lens? Can education be the impetus for cultural change? And, by focusing our energies on the smallest single unit of culture, the school, what possibilities does this new lens generate/require/reveal, especially if we allow ourselves to question everything: axiology, epistemology, ontology, certainly, but also pedagogy, governance, assessment, teacher role, parental and community

involvement, timetables, location and, of course, curricula?

### Why Integrated Curricula?

The challenges for the project have consistently been multi-faceted and multi-layered. For example, there is an onus upon the project to have theory and practice align and yet, given the complexity of the project and the incompleteness of both theory and practice, this is a noticeably organic and messy process. What is an ecological worldview? What, then, would be the practices that best map onto that view? It is in response to these questions that we think integrated curricula begin to make sense.

Picture this. It is October, the fall salmon migration has yet to begin because everything is waiting for the West Coast rains to begin in earnest. However, students are preparing for the fish frenzy that is about to begin. Working with various community partners the students are adding to the last ten years of data collection. Some are working in boats alongside First Nations fishermen to catch, count, sample and help prepare; some are working with the fish hatcheries located in the two key watersheds of the community to gather and fertilize eggs and use the laboratory facilities to analyze the samples being gathered in hopes of getting a clearer picture with regard to the health of the fish and the watersheds themselves. Other students are preparing for the annual presentation on the state of fish health in the municipal chambers, while still others are gathering carcasses, that vital source of nitrogen, to be dug into the gardens before the cover crop is planted, and then putting the finishing touches on their seasonal gardening and cooking book that they have prepared for sale at the farmers' market. This could continue. But the point is to recognize the integrated curricula and, more importantly for our work, ways the curricula have been aligned with the complexity, interdependence, interconnection and diversity that are part of how we are making sense of an ecological worldview. If we are claiming an ecological worldview, then how can we justify curricula that are

linear, fragmented, alienated from place and hierarchized?

Although still in its emergent phase we have begun, as a project, to talk of the “12 keys” to an ecological worldview, and these, in turn, become a kind of lens through which we can look in order to make decisions with regard to practice. These 12 keys—complexity, diversity, flourishing, interdependence, lack of hierarchy, change in notion of competition (towards co-operation as some ecologists suggest, but also counter to the dangers of Social Darwinism), dynamic equilibrium, flexibility, capacity, nesting, spontaneity / mutation and humility—have been gathered from various sources: Capra (2002), Naess (1986), Bowers (2001) and ecological science itself.<sup>iv</sup> It has been through this lens that the reasons for integrated curricula have become crystal clear.

### Conclusion

Can a “school” be the focus for cultural change? And what does it take to move towards a more ecological worldview? The answers to these questions are still likely five or ten years away; however, as of now it is at least possible to say that in order to even have a shot we must, at the very least

- be willing to question everything—some components might be all right as they are and fit the framework, but the question still needs to be asked;
- be prepared for pain—I have come to decide that genuine transformation, although wondrous, freeing, magical, and so on, never comes without pain;
- never assume—assumptions tend to rise from the previous and problematic worldview; and
- do it together—allies, supports and fellow questioners are necessary.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup>For a more complete sense of this project, please see our website at <http://schools.sd42.ca/es/>.

<sup>ii</sup>To date, more than 70 children and their families have applied for 60 spaces. “School” begins in September 2011.

<sup>iii</sup>The quotation marks around school and class remind us that these words carry metaphorical weight, assumptions and cultural baggage, some of which is troublesome for this project. We use them advisedly. We will be community based, without a building and likely working in multi-age groupings.

<sup>iv</sup>Important note: Nature has long been interpreted through our own particular human and cultural lens. The standard current Western story is of a violent, unforgiving, red in tooth and claw, survival-of-the-fittest hierarchy. Our hope is to push back on that conceptualization noting the fecundity, the diversity, the compromise vs. competition and even the sense of belonging that appears to be offered. Climber Chris Bonnington once noted that accidents in mountaineering tended to let climbers know what they have been getting away with in the past, which suggests a much more forgiving presence than many common myths of the natural world offer. This is the edge of a much larger conversation better left to another paper. The point—we are indeed trying to think differently about nature, but through shaping a narrative not without justification and substantial evidence.

### References

- Blenkinsop, S., & Fettes, M. (2009). *Aligning education and sustainability in Maple Ridge, BC: A study of place-based ecological schooling*. Successful SSHRC eCURA grant application.
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*Sean Blenkinsop teaches educational philosophy in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University.*