



How My Schooling Taught Me Contempt for the Earth

BY BILL BIGELOW

I grew up hearing the phrase “no deposit, no return”—just throw stuff “away” and forget about it. The slogan was emblematic of a culture premised on unlimited extraction, production, and consumption—a culture living as if there were no tomorrow. Thanks to environmental activists, we now know that continuing on the present course means there won’t be a tomorrow—or at least not one hospitable to life.

As a classroom teacher, I’ve thought and taught a lot about the hidden curriculum of race, class, and gender—and I continue to gain new insights as I probe the pervasiveness of white, middle-class, and male norms in schooling and the broader society. And that led me to consider the subterranean messages about the Earth that I learned in my own schooling. Although my classes included no *explicit* ecological curriculum, there was a profound *hidden* ecological curriculum—one that taught neglect and

even contempt for the Earth. I don't mean to bash my elementary teachers for their ignorance of ecological issues. I never even heard the term "ecology" until my first year of college, 1969, when people were becoming more aware of environmental degradation. It would be disingenuous to shake a scolding finger at my late 1950s, early 1960s teachers. What I've discovered in this backward glance is how much my own teaching—as well as the school cultures where I've taught—resembles my early education, even though I talk more about ecological problems than my teachers did.

Bel Aire Elementary

When my family moved in 1957 from Los Angeles to Tiburon, California, a suburb of San Francisco, the area was still largely rural (I was 5). Cows grazed about a hundred yards from our house. Richardson Bay was just down the hill, across the railroad tracks; its rocky beaches stretched in both directions. Our neighborhood of 60 or so houses was nestled in rolling grass-covered hills dotted with eucalyptus trees. Blue belly lizards and horned toads inhabited huge rocks. Each spring the hills would bloom with brilliantly colored golden poppies and other wildflowers. Over the hill to the south, streams trickled into dense wetlands of cattails, frogs, and alligator lizards.

I spent every after-school moment—and every weekend or summer day—outside until it got dark. I knew where to dig the best underground forts, and how to avoid the toffee-like clay soil. I knew the places where, on rare occasions, I might find a salamander. From long observation at nearby ponds I knew the exact process of a pollywog's transition into a frog, and the relative speed of different kinds of snakes: garter vs. gopher vs. western racer. I knew the best climbing rocks. I was an expert on the properties of mud, and the precise kind of grass required for the fastest cardboard sledding. My playmates and I dug forts in the hills, built tree houses, hiked, explored, caught every reptile we could find, played

kick the can over great distances, and made rafts out of driftwood.

We had named key landmarks in the area: the Jungle, for a cavernous tangle of evergreen trees in a place that felt like a natural cathedral, but that we visited infrequently; the Trees, for a grove of huge eucalyptus where we often played; Naked Rock, (a name passed down to us by an older group of kids who claimed to have once danced naked around the rock); Eagle Rock; and Lizard Rock.

Nature surrounded us, but we were also surrounded by "development," by the continual construction of houses, the encroachment of new neighborhoods and roads crisscrossing the hills. My childhood was filled with the natural world, but also with the seeming inevitability of its commercial appropriation. We had a love/hate relationship with "development." We played hide-and-seek in the houses under construction, jumping off roofs, and rafting in basements when they flooded. But, inexorably, the builders seized and destroyed increasing amounts of our natural playground.

How did our schooling extend or suppress our naive Earth knowledge and our love of place? Through silence about the Earth and the indigenous Miwok people of Tiburon, Bel Aire School, perched on the slopes of a steep golden-grassed hill, taught plenty. We actively learned to *not think* about the Earth, about the place where we were. We could have been anywhere—or nowhere. Teachers made no effort to incorporate our vast, if immature, knowledge of the land into the curriculum. Whether it was in the study of history, writing, science, arithmetic, reading, or art, school erected a Berlin Wall between academics and the rest of our lives. Although we spent our afternoons, weekends, and summers outdoors, aside from recess, school was an indoor affair—surrounded by metal, plastic, glass, brick, and linoleum. The hills above the school were a virtual wilderness of grasslands and trees, but in six years I can't recall a single "field trip" to those wide-open spaces. We became inured to spending days in manufactured space, accustomed to watching more Earth bulldozed and covered with yet more manufactured spaces.

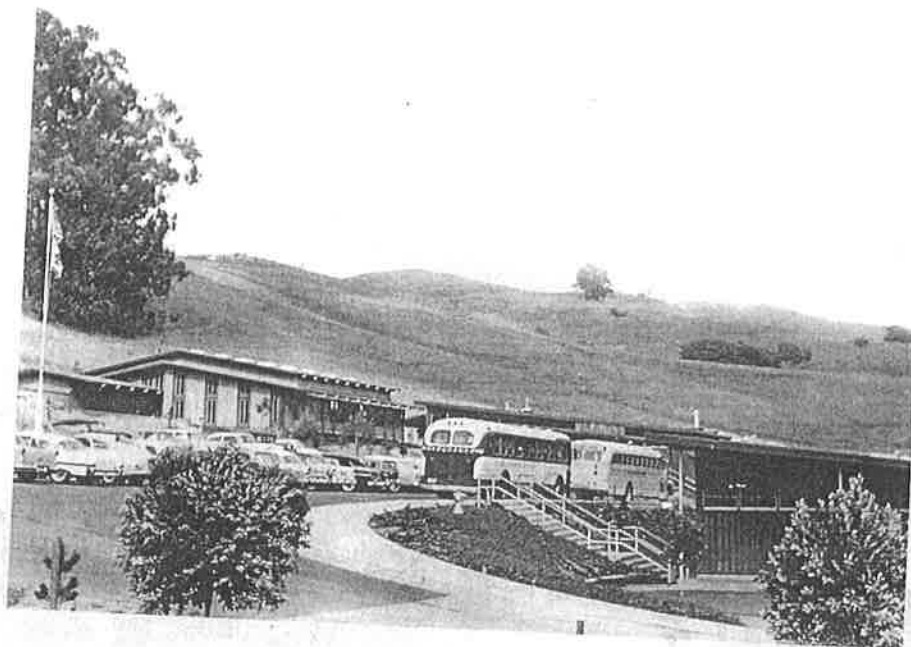
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My schooling suppressed any notion that I would spend my life outdoors. We were taught that the important work of society—which would be *our* work—occurs indoors, with books, and paper and pencils. The repetition of this indoor education taught us that the land beneath this structure was so much inert *stuff*—mere dirt on top of which happens real life. Outdoors was for play, for fun—but not for knowledge of self, culture, or the Earth. Real knowledge was “Egypt,” arithmetic, report writing, the Civil War—even “Indians,” but in a “let’s-name-the-tribes-and-make-tepees” kind of way. School taught us our Earth knowledge was play/recess/other/trivia.

Of course, there was a class component to this indoor education. By and large, we were the children of young professionals. We were being groomed for white-collar office work, not to be farmers or construction workers.

Maybe this heavy indoor bias is beginning to erode.

For years, 6th graders from Portland Public Schools have spent a week at Outdoor School near Mt. Hood, learning about ecological issues—observing wildlife habitats, identifying plants, studying about how rivers and streams are formed. Kids explore the wilderness and learn rudimentary survival skills. I’ve never met a student who didn’t cherish this one-week sojourn. But even this fine program has an unsettling subtext: In order to learn about the “outdoors,” the Earth, one must travel away from the place where he or she lives. Nature is found in special places, well outside the city limits. The unintended message may be that urban areas are conquered territory, ecologically lost causes—and that the best we can hope for is an occa-



Bel Aire School, Tiburon, California, circa 1960.

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sional escape to a pristine wilderness. Sadly, in the era of yearly budget cuts that have arrived with the regularity of Oregon rain, proponents of even this minimal environmental education have had to fight to keep it alive.

Who Was Here First?

We learned about “Indians” in elementary school, but not about the Miwoks who inhabited the land now parceled into neighborhoods with names like Little Reed Heights and Belveron Gardens. I had no way of knowing that First Nations peoples might have had different names and stories for the places where I played or how much I could learn from these stories about relationships between people and the land. And our teachers did not ask us to reflect on the place Bel Aire School occupied: Who owned this space where we were sitting? How did they come to control it? Who was here first? Why aren’t those people here anymore? How did these other people teach their young? If our teachers had raised these questions we would have had to confront the contradic-

tion that we were on the land we loved only because it had been twice stolen: First the Spaniards stole it from the native Miwoks, and then the United States took it from the Spaniards (by then, Mexicans).

Because we were not encouraged to reflect on the character of the land, we came to accept its transformation as “development” and “progress.” Developers filled in the wetlands to build a new neighborhood and a junior high school. No one asked whether we agreed with this development; in fact, we weren’t asked to consider it at all. I almost wrote that we watched helplessly as streams were buried, and the hills invaded by construction crews. But in truth, we didn’t watch helplessly, we watched unconsciously. It never occurred to me to question the environmental justice of these actions. We may or may not have learned how to diagram a sentence, but we did learn to *not question*.

Nor was resistance in our conceptual vocabulary. When crews tore up the beach to build a four-lane highway just a couple of hundred yards from our house, no one protested. The kids in the neighborhood loved that beach, but the adults seemed to treat the land as empty space waiting to be done-to. I’m not saying that school created these notions of progress, but in numerous ways it legitimated them. (Ten years or so after demolishing about a mile of rugged beach, the powers that be changed their minds and decided not to continue the highway. With great fanfare, part of the bayfront land was turned into a soccer field.) One of my favorite pastimes when I was young was to imagine that the Russians had invaded and my friends and I were guerrilla soldiers defending our homeland. In real life, the Russians never arrived, but the bulldozers and dump trucks did. School had taught us to look for enemies in all the wrong places.

In school, we were never encouraged to think ecologically—to consider the interdependence of air, soil, water, plants, trees, animals, and humans. We lacked an ecological sensibility, so we regretted the loss of wetlands and forested areas to “development,” but we couldn’t critique this destruction in terms of the loss of the region’s biodiversity. We were ecologically illiterate. Numerous species of plants and animals were wiped out on the Tiburon peninsula, but schooling offered us no conceptual framework to mourn the enormous loss.

This hidden ecological curriculum is politically

useful for powerful interests in our society. Writer Wendell Berry notes that social elites “cannot take any place seriously because they must be ready at any moment, by the terms of power and wealth in the modern world, to destroy any place.” Popular acceptance, if not support, for this destruction needs to be taught.

The hidden ecological curriculum at Bel Aire School encouraged students to *not think* about the Earth, to *not question* the system of commodification that turns the world, including the land, into things to be bought and sold. These are not merely curricular omissions, but active processes of moral anesthesia. The late poet Adrienne Rich wrote “lying is done with words, and also with silence.” When the curriculum is silent about aspects of life—racism, sexism, global inequality, or the destruction of the Earth—that silence normalizes these patterns and implicitly tells kids, “Hey, nothing to worry about; that’s just the way things are, the way they ought to be.” And that’s the lie.

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Explorers, Discoverers, and the Earth

We learned contempt for the Earth not just in the *how* of schooling, but also in the *what* of schooling; harmful ecological messages were woven into the fabric of the curriculum. I recall social studies in 1st through 6th grades as one long celebration of the brave Europeans who carried civilization to the Americas. One year, my teacher assigned us each a different explorer. Mine was Coronado. We mapped their travels throughout the “New World”—new to whom?—and hung the maps around the room, commemorating the spread of European outposts in the supposed wilderness.

We studied “Indians” in 3rd and 4th grades, but in ways that reinforced a primitive-to-advanced continuum. We studied in depth the indigenous societies most like “us”—the Aztec and Inca, for example—with complex divisions of labor and networks of trade, powerful militaries, influential (i.e., imperialistic) states, and accumulations of great wealth. Other American Indian cultures dotted the primitive-to-advanced continuum at lesser points, and

we discussed them more superficially. Highlighting “advanced” societies dismissed the wisdom of those cultures that lived in ecological balance for countless generations. If the latter were designated “primitive,” we studied them as quaint artifacts, but not for what we could learn in order to reorient life today in our society. These curricular choices served to confirm that the society we lived in was the inevitable product of progress. Of course, as a 9- or 10-year-old, I wasn’t conscious of any of this. That’s what makes a hidden curriculum hidden.

Consumption as a Way of Life

The most effective aspects of any hidden curriculum are the ones that are hardest to see, the ones we simply take for granted. This includes the myth of the individual existing as independent agents in the world. In the book *Responsive Teaching*, authors C. A. Bowers and David Flinders ask teachers to consider “whether the culture is learned by students in a manner that leads them to view the ‘self’ as the basic unit of survival and progress or to recognize the interdependence of ‘self,’ culture, and the ecosystem.” This is a vital concern. For me, Bel Aire School was both a symbol of and preparation for life in a society of essentially disconnected rational human beings seeking “success,” which meant maximizing our material opportunities. Sure, we were taught to respect each other’s property, not to hit one another, to cooperate on the playground and in sports. But the structure of being grouped by individual “ability,” receiving individual grades, and the patterns of individual work taught us that our basic mission was to look out for number one. As early as elementary school we were conditioned to maneuver through the institution making rational choices that would enhance our ultimate salability as labor commodities—“If you want to get a good job. . .” The hidden ecological curriculum of the school structure highlighted “self,” but failed to alert us to “the interdependence of ‘self,’ culture, and the ecosystem.” The myth of the individual taught us to think about ourselves and our families but to *not think* about the Earth—or about cultural patterns that might be more ecologically responsible.

This curricular cult of the individual ensured that if and when students did become more aware of the ecological crisis, they would think about per-

sonal rather than systemic responses—for example, I should recycle more and buy less. But as John Belamy Foster insists in *The Vulnerable Planet*: “The chief causes of the environmental destruction that faces us today are not biological, or the product of individual human choice. They are social and historical, rooted in the productive relations, technological imperatives, and historically conditioned demographic trends that characterize the dominant social system.” A system premised on the commodification of nature and endless growth is inherently counter-ecological. But a curriculum that promotes an ideology of the autonomous individual fails to equip students to think systemically.

Toward an Ecologically Responsible Curriculum

I’d like to wax triumphant about how I’ve fundamentally “greened” my curriculum, but that process is ongoing. For now, I can offer broad principles I’m trying to effect as I construct an ecologically responsible curriculum:

- **As my critique of the hidden ecological curriculum at Bel Aire School suggests, place matters.** A concern for the Earth begins at home. Students ought to think about the history and character of the place they live: How has it changed and why? This means getting students outdoors, interrupting the traditional school-think that learning occurs primarily in classrooms.
- **An important component of this curriculum of place should be a focus on the ecological patterns of the original inhabitants of the land.** I’m not suggesting that we disable our critical filters when studying indigenous societies—some were sharply hierarchical, militaristic, and practiced slavery. But embedded in the traditions of many First Nations is a kind of ecological golden rule. Students should be exposed to cultures that honor the “voice” of the Earth.
- **Students need to develop an ecological literacy that alerts them to life’s interconnectedness.** For example, in the Northwest, where I live, students should have an awareness of how deforestation pollutes

the rivers and affects the quality of drinking water and the viability of salmon spawning, etc. When they consider the possibility of the Northwest becoming a depot for coal to Asia, they should consider carbon dioxide, mercury, which social groups live closest to the railroad tracks, and the impact of diesel fumes on children—and not merely the potential for new jobs. Students should consider the Earth a living web of relationships that includes—and sustains—humanity.

- **An ecological curriculum doesn't merely entail studying nature.** It requires that we equip students to question the root concepts of Western civilization: “progress,” “development,” freedom for the autonomous individual, growth as goodness, private property as the basis of the good society. Throughout the curriculum, we need to ask how understandings of these ideas have helped or hindered ecological sustainability.
- **The power of a green curriculum lies in its “ecology”—the interdependence of social and environmental insights.** Just as there is no human epoch without ecological implications, no ecological issue exists without a social dimension. Earth-conscious teaching should prompt students to think about the intersection of race, class, gender, nationality, and the environment. This requires that we ask essential critical questions when studying the environment. To cite just one obvious example: Wealthy individuals with enormous carbon footprints will not be the ones turned into climate refugees as rising sea levels inundate the poor in places like Bangladesh. No “green curriculum” is worth the paper it is written on unless it addresses broader issues of social inequality.



In today's world, a deep ecological consciousness is a basic skill. The “buy-until-you-die” consumer orientation that bombards us from morning until night is not sustainable. The planet is in peril, and despite the conceit that suggests we humans are above it all, our fate is intimately coupled to that of the Earth, albeit unequally. It's about time the entire curriculum asks: What about the Earth? 🌍

Bill Bigelow (bbpdx@aol.com) is curriculum editor of Rethinking Schools magazine.