

School Education and Ecological Identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2003, *the Law for Enhancing Motivation on Environmental Conservation and Promoting of Environmental Education* was enacted in Japan. With this Law, the Ministry of the Environment, in order to create a sustainably developing society, promotes environmental education in schools, communities, workplaces, and homes. When having been informed of the Law, however, I wondered: Does environmental education, or education in general, construct environmental consciousness?

This paper attempts to answer this question based on interviews with staff members of an environmental Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). The staff members were chosen because despite having been socialized in environmentally destructive society, they have somehow developed environmental consciousness, or ecological identity (Thomashow, 1996), striving to solve impending environmental problems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHOD

Since the 1980's, numerous Significant Life Experiences (SLE) research papers have been published in the field of environmental education studies. SLE research investigates significant ecological experiences in the lives of people, mainly environmental specialists, that influence awareness of the natural environment and lead to the shaping of ecological identity.

In Japan, the first research of this nature was conducted by environmental education scholar Shinichi Furihata (2005), which focused on 188 executive officers of environmental education organizations. Ten SLE categories were determined from answers to the questionnaires distributed in the study (in order of the frequency): nature experience [*sic*], a lost sense of nature, family, books/media, social activity, school, work, friends, others, and travel.

Meanwhile, from April to October 2009, I carried out semistructured interviews in Japanese with 29 staff members of an environmental NGO based in Japan. The collected data enabled me to qualitatively delve into their significant ecological experiences by asking them to reflect on such experiences. I decided not to use the data provided by three of the participants, as they did not seem to possess an ecological identity; two were interest-

ed in contributing to nonprofit work, while one was finding a sense of satisfaction in the international nature of the work. An analysis of the interviews revealed that seven factors—nature experience, a lost sense of nature, family, books/media, school, ecological social events, and the shadow of America—were key in establishing their ecological identities. The former five overlap Furihata's research, while the remaining two emerged in the process of my analysis. Of these, I would like to draw attention to the "School" factor in this paper.

3. SCHOOL EDUCATION AND ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

3.1 School Education Constructs Ecological Identity

As mentioned in the previous section, I identified "School" as one of the seven factors. The reason is that school, or education, appears to be one of the sites where their ecological identities were anchored. During the interviews, they alluded to their schooling periods as significant to the development of their ecological identities. Ms. Higashi is just such a case. During the interview, she told me that one of her elementary school teachers was influential in cultivating her ecological identity. She explained this defining life event as follows (the two slash lines [/ /] indicate omission of word[s]):

Higashi: My teacher in the fifth or sixth grade was studying butterflies, and influenced me at great length, I think. The teacher told us, "When your mother is trying to kill a roach, it's thinking, 'I've gotta run away,'" and this brought a fresh sense to a child's mind. From this teacher, [I learned] the importance of living things, lives, and nature //

In the same vein as Ms. Higashi, Ms. Kaneshiro stated that she became motivated to engage in environmentalism in elementary school. In her narratives, she characterized the following episode:

Kaneshiro: Around the time when I was in elementary school, we learned at school that environmental problems were serious // so, I thought we needed someone to address them.

Later in the interview, Ms. Kaneshiro acknowledged that not only elementary school but also junior high school

was an arena where her ecological identity was nurtured. She reflected (the asterisk symbol [*] indicates the author's word[s]):

Kaneshiro: Why [did I become interested in] environmental problems? Actually, ultimately, school education was the trigger, I think. Elementary school and junior high school. By saying so, I might sound like a very serious A-student (laughter), but, after all, I believe I pretty much belong to the generation that learned, "We have these problems" and "We have those problems." People my age are, generally speaking, the generation that grew up by being told that environmental problems were serious // Starting from "resources will be depleted soon" and "oil will be exhausted within certain years," and also waste problems, too? And chemical contamination //

(*): During your school education, in what subject were you taught [about environmental problems]?

Kaneshiro: Social studies, probably.

As in her account, Ms. Kaneshiro's generation learned about pollution problems in school. The education is called *kôgai-kyôiku* in Japanese, or pollution education. It is Japan's first environmental education initiative, unique to Japan, raising the public's consciousness of the right to the environment (Sekigami, 2005). In fact, I belong to the same generation as Ms. Kaneshiro and, accordingly, received this education in social studies. While it did not successfully manage to spark ecological identity within me (because other factors such as *nature experience* and *books* have fashioned my ecological identity), in Ms. Kaneshiro's case, it is one of the essential factors in the formation of her ecological identity.

In the case of Ms. Kitada, she began to harbor an interest in environmental issues at around age 15 when in Japan, one is supposed to be in either junior high or high school. Her narrative:

Kitada: // I've been concerned about waste problems since I was around 15.

(*): Wow.

Kitada: // For example, when I had to write a report for the social studies class, I produced a report about something related to them [waste problems]. Or, whenever I had to pick a subject, I was naturally picking them //

Going beyond high school, the present study identifies four participants whose enthusiasm for environmentalism traced back to their time at university. Mr. Kawabe is one case:

Kawabe: Well, my university is in Kyoto and I started there in 1997. In the same year, by chance, the Kyoto Conference [COP3] took place in the city, though I only got the feeling that something important was going on. Well, back then, during the Conference, I wasn't that interested. But, // I had to make a presentation [about the Conference] in my seminar class and, so, at the very least, I read books and newspaper articles. I also wrote a paper //

Obviously, Mr. Kawabe's ecological identity is at least partially informed during university through the experience of researching for the sake of a presentation and a paper on the environmental conference.

Likewise, Mr. Kyomoto's ecological identity started to grow while at university:

Kyomoto: Well, the direct trigger [for my ecological identity to grow] dates back to my university days. I majored in international relations, and // studied about the U.N., NGOs, and stuff. Needless to say, global challenges were always taken up as topics, including population issues and human rights. Poverty, too. Let alone development and the environment. // among these U.N.- and NGO-related areas, I picked the environment [as my own research topic] when I had to choose.

In the example of Ms. Saita, her ecological identity was first inspired by the book, *King Solomon's Ring*, by ethologist Konrad Lorenz, which she read in the fifth or sixth grade. During her university years, her ecological identity was reinforced via study and discussions with classmates:

Saita: My department at university was called environmental resources. That's where I really was taught about // every environmental problem, ranging from air pollution to water pollution to microorganism to wildlife to plants to forests. // Besides, everyone around me was highly interested in environmental issues, so we discussed pretty much everything, arguing over one thing or another, which deepened my relevant knowledge.

So is Ms. Kawanaka; her ecological identity was also shaped by university education. At one point in the interview, she reflected:

Kawanaka: I first learned about symbiosis between nature and human beings in university. // the trigger [for my ecological identity to grow] was my university days // when I studied symbiosis with nature, which has been lost by now. The topic of my senior thesis was changes

in common forests during and after the Middle Ages, which [also] led me to become interested in the natural environment and environmental issues.

In her case, learning about symbiosis and writing a senior thesis on forests at university played a role in establishing her ecological identity.

To briefly summarize this section, education at school from elementary school to university can empower people with ecological identities. In what follows, I will consider a potential side effect of school education.

3.2 School Education and Elitism

Among the 26 research participants, almost all of them are highly educated, with 2 having graduated from 2-year college, 15 from university, and 9 from graduate school. Indeed, an analysis of data of approximately 4,000 research participants in the first four rounds of the biennial Texas Environmental Survey conducted in November and December of 1990, 1992, 1994, and 1996 concludes that those who are better educated are more concerned about environmental quality and committed to environmental protection (Klineberg, McKeever, & Rothenbach, 1998). Presumably in part because of this, some of the participants are found to have a certain elitism, an attitude that a society should be run by the elite, in the same manner as other environmentalists (Humphrey & Buttel, 1982). Worth noting is Mr. Kawabe, who holds a Master's degree:

(*): // What comes to your mind when you hear the term "environmental issue"?

Kawabe: // probably, garbage and recycling would come to *lay people's* [emphasis added] minds but *I* [emphasis added], well, wouldn't say that they weren't related to environmental issues. Soil contamination can be caused, and all resource issues are part of environmental issues, I think. But, somehow, I still have difficulty considering waste issues to be environmental issues.

(*): Is that so?

Here, it seems that he maintains the *I/lay people* dichotomy in his mind, an elitist reference.

In a similar way, Ms. Saita, holding a Bachelor's degree, also embraces the *I/lay people* dichotomy, which the following passage vividly attests to:

(*): // What comes to your mind when you hear the term "environmental issue"?

Saita: // It rather exudes an image of biodiversity protection //

(*): So, biodiversity, or flora and fauna come first?

Saita: Right, yes. So, while waste issues and, to my surprise, global warming would come to *lay people's* [emphasis added] minds, // it [biodiversity] comes to *my* [emphasis added] mind first when hearing the term "environmental issue."

Here, I cannot fail to notice the elitist tone in her narrative. Similarly to that seen in Mr. Kawabe's comment, this is due to the *I/lay people* dichotomy.

To take as another example Mr. Arakawa with a Bachelor's degree, in his case, he holds the *we (NGO)/lay people* dichotomy:

Arakawa: The environmental destruction currently discussed is caused by human beings and, so, as long as they exist, it will continue to exist. As it's impossible to prevent it, instead of preventing it, we guide it in a better direction. Therefore, for example, when cowboys guide cattle on the western wilderness [in the U.S.], only a few cowboys on horses do so. If the cattle start stampeding, nobody can stop them. So, in order to prevent this, the cowboys guide them skillfully. [In the same way.] *we* [emphasis added] guide [*lay people*] to reduce the degree of the destruction. Otherwise, the cattle wouldn't listen.

(*): Hmmm.

Arakawa: So, all in all, we shouldn't offend the cattle // instead of offending them, we have to feed and guide them.

Here, Mr. Arakawa likens lay people to cattle. In his thinking, there exists the structuralist formula *we : lay people :: cowboys : cattle*, configuring his elitist frame of mind. This reminds me of the pitfalls, in which those involved in environmentalism are not aware enough of the unconscious power that positions them as heroes of justice (Furukawa, 1999).

In the case of Mr. Shima, who obtained two Bachelor's degrees in Japan and the U.S., I find that the structuralist equation he espouses is *we : lay people :: sensitized : desensitized*, again, insinuating elitism:

Shima: Those who can sense that the environment or this world where they live is being destroyed, even if not sensing it directly, are taking actions or took actions, I think. So, *there're sensitized people and desensitized people* [emphasis added]. A sensitized person wrote the book, *Silent Spring* [by Rachel Carson], as early as 50 years ago. Back then, desensitized people never thought that nature was being destroyed or wondered what would happen to the environment, [then] politicians, for instance. // my own sense of crisis is related to my anger and agony over the

fact that my beloved living things and the natural world are disappearing. // There're lots of people who haven't moved their butts and, so, I think *our task is probably to move their butts* [emphasis added].

In environmental movements, there are many cases where the dichotomy *we/they* is implied (Yuki, 2004), while the present study witnesses the dichotomies of *I/lay people* and *we/lay people*. I would say that such binary oppositions, coming from elitist thoughts, can be problematic; this is simply because environmentalism is to be led not by the 1% of the elite but by the 100% of all, that is, *ecological democracy* (Humphrey, Lewis, & Buttel, 2002).

4. CONCLUSION

The present study has revealed that education at school, ranging from elementary school to university, can construct ecological identity. The results align with some past SLE studies (e.g., Furihata, 2005; Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2006, 2007; Klineberg, McKeever, & Rothenbach, 1998). In a SLE study, experiences at elementary, junior high, and high schools are called *fundamental SLE*, while those at university are named *direct influential SLE* (Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2006, 2007). In this study, however, an overt difference between the two is not observed.

Now, let me return to the research question: Does education construct environmental identity? Based on the research results, I can, with some reservation, say yes. My reservation arises from the tendency for the elitism supposedly partially created as a side effect of education. This point should never be neglected in an effort to construct environmental identity through education, for environmentalism is to engage not only by the 1% of the elite, but the 100% of all.

*This paper is based on the author's 2010 dissertation.

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