Healing Earth in a Time of Crisis: Curriculum for Integral Ecology

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Abstract: This dissertation study explores educators’ experiences teaching with Healing Earth, a curriculum for integral ecology developed by the International Jesuit Ecology Project in connection with Loyola University Chicago’s School of Sustainability. The conceptual framework of integral ecology, based on Pope Francis’s encyclical Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home, provides an expansive view of ecology based on the understanding that everything is connected. This framework applies a transdisciplinary approach and views ecological and social problems as intertwined.

I collected preliminary data through a survey asking educators about their teaching contexts and uses of Healing Earth. I then conducted in-depth interviews with five educators who have taught with Healing Earth at the secondary and tertiary levels. Seven themes emerged in my analysis of interview data: community and collaboration, adaptability for diverse contexts, student engagement, spiritual ecology in a Catholic context, perceiving Earth’s intrinsic value, generating hope, and taking action.

Introduction:

Ecological Crisis:
• Interrelated crises of climate change, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity collapse
• Impacts all aspects of our lives (health, food systems, housing, economy, politics, psychology, spirituality, etc.)

Curriculum Problem
• Fragmentation of knowledge into separate disciplines, subjects, and units, ignoring the interconnectedness of our world
• Curriculum is designed to serve and reproduce the unjust and unsustainable systems currently in place

Conceptual Framework:

Integral Ecology: “a way of understanding and studying the natural world that combines environmental science, environmental ethics, and environmental spirituality for the sake of actions that promote the well-being of nature and society”.

Healing Earth’s Ethical Framework for Integral Ecology

Moral Principles
• Care for creation
• Human dignity and rights
• Common good
• Universal destination of goods
• Preferred options for the poor
• Subsidiarity (VHA 105, 26)

Moral Goals
• Justice for all nations
• Peace on earth
• Care for all species
• Respect for life

Moral Virtues
• Prudence
• Temperance
• Justice
• Fortitude

Ethical Foundations:

Intrinsic Value, Instrumental Value, Environmental Sustainability

Healing Earth Curriculum

Healing Earth is an open-access integral ecology curriculum exploring science content in connection with human contexts and perspectives of diverse faith traditions, ethical foundations, and moral principles: https://healingearth.jiep.net/

Each unit addresses a major aspect of our global ecological crisis:
1. Declining biodiversity
2. Natural resource depletion
3. Water quality and availability
4. Food quality and availability
5. On the edge of change

REFERENCES:

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Research Questions:
• How do secondary- and tertiary-level educators describe their experiences teaching with Healing Earth?
  o In what ways do these educators use Healing Earth curriculum resources?
  o How have these educators incorporated the principles of integral ecology when teaching with Healing Earth, including the understanding that all life and systems on Earth are interconnected; belief in the intrinsic value of nature; and integrating spirituality, ethics, humanities, politics, and social sciences, into ecological understandings?
• What opportunities and barriers have these educators encountered when teaching with Healing Earth?
• In these educators’ accounts, how do students respond to the Healing Earth curriculum? What questions do students raise? What topics or actions are students most interested in pursuing?
• What lessons have these educators drawn from teaching with Healing Earth? What ideas and vision do they share for future directions in education?

Research Design
Qualitative Multiple-Case Study with Sequential Design

Initial Survey
• Online (Qualtrics) questionnaire sent to educators who have taught with Healing Earth: 14 sent, 12 responses.
• Questions about participants’ contexts, experience teaching with Healing Earth, and other ecology-related teaching experiences.
• Used surveys to recruit participants for upcoming interviews.

Interviews
• 5 interview participants based on survey responses.
• 2 interviews per candidate via Zoom, 45-60 minutes each.
• Semi-structured interviews loosely based on pre-determined questions, varies with flow of each interview.
• 1st interview focused on participants’ contexts and experiences teaching with Healing Earth.
• 2nd interview explored interpretations of participants’ experiences, allowing participants to verify researcher’s understanding and participate in analysis.

Data Analysis
• Exploratory approach
• Seven themes emerged through iterative exploration of survey data and interview transcripts

Interview Participants

“James”
• Jesuit High School
• United States
• Environmental Science (AP)
• HE case studies, ethical framework

“Marie”
• Catholic High School
• United States
• Environmental Science (elective)

“Irene”
• Jesuit University
• United States
• Ignatian Foundations (THEO)
• Course text, “Common Good” project

“Paul” and “Wondama”
• Jesuit University
• Indonesia
• Co-teach Healing Earth course
• Course fully based on HE curriculum

Key Findings by Theme

Community and Collaboration
• Participants were united by a shared set of educational, ecological, and spiritual values.
• All participants demonstrated a strong desire to connect with likeminded educators.
• However, interviews did not provide significant examples of cross-faculty collaboration in teaching of Healing Earth.

Adaptability for Diverse Contexts
• Healing Earth is used in diverse academic levels and focus areas.
• Survey respondents reported using Healing Earth in courses such as Ignatian Service Learning (ISL), Geography, Scientific Culture; and Jesus & Darwin: The Intersection Between Faith and Science.
• Most survey responses reported that Healing Earth met needs either “extremely well” (50%) or “moderately well” (~42%).

Student Engagement
• Participants described students’ high interest and emotional responses to learning through Healing Earth
• Key reasons for successful engagement of students: 1) exploration of real-life phenomena through case studies 2) educators’ passion and engagement in content 3) issues’ relevance to students’ lives.

Spiritual Ecology in a Catholic Context
• Catholic institutions were found to be favorable environments for exploring Healing Earth’s spiritual and ethical components.
• However, there is also potential for Catholic institutions to have a restrictive influence on ecological teaching and learning.

Perceiving Earth’s Intrinsic Value
• Participants imparted understanding of nature’s intrinsic value through direct experience of nature, including outdoor excursions, planting, and mindful eating activities.
• Participants frequently used spiritual/religious terminology.

Generating Hope
• Participants described efforts to help students overcome feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness.
• Teaching Healing Earth helped participants themselves feel more hopeful about the future.

Taking Action
• Participants balanced opportunities for action in the present with reflection on students’ motivation to act in the future.
• Service-learning activities were powerful immediate examples. Small-scale actions and lifestyle changes were important in demonstrating commitment to lifelong action and engagement.

Recommendations
• For future research, I recommend continued exploration of uses and impacts of Healing Earth, especially through participatory action research and studies that include student voice.
• For the Healing Earth team, I recommend continuing to translate into multiple languages, adapting the curriculum for younger learners; promoting more cross-curricular applications of Healing Earth; and developing more teacher resources including guided reading questions and assessment materials.