

Growing up green

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Abstract

Green-voting parents and their children provide important clues about how their households potentially act as ideal sites for environmental education and, consequently, 'sustainability'. In this interpretive study of inner-city 'green' families and their domestic practices of an environmental ethic, the findings reveal how the parents' eco-pedagogy and praxis (re)constitute the environmental actions and learning of their children. The paper concludes with some recommendations and considerations relevant to curriculum and pedagogical development, and the need for further situated, contextual and comparative studies that add to the evidence-base about the ecologies of human development.

Our postmodern *oikos*¹—homes, families and environmental education

Since the early 1990s, water consumption in Victoria has been reduced by nineteen per cent due to the state government's efforts in public education and implementation of water restrictions. Flushed with this success, the government now wants families to reduce household electricity consumption by fifteen per cent over the next few years. This type of response to the ominous consequences of climate change aims to increase public support for the use of renewable energies as well as encourage households to be far less wasteful. For example, commentators remind us that a staggering thirteen per cent of energy used

¹ *The Greek noun oikos, meaning 'home' or 'household', is the etymological basis of the term 'ecology' (and economy). Combined with the root *logos*, meaning 'the study of', ecology is the study of the household, including the interdependent relations of household members and plants, animals and so on, hence 'environmental house' or 'place' (Odum, 1989).*

where the notions of natural, human, social, manufactured and financial 'assets' or 'capital' were considered. Specifically, sustainability issues addressed at this conference were much broader and more far-reaching than the government's limited successes so far in water and energy conservation. Government policy can only ever scratch the surface of more volatile 'future' issues like sustainability; much is left to educators and other local activities, be it at home, or school, or in the neighbourhood. For example, HEIA conference presentations included nutrition and diet, child and adolescent development, consumer choice, food policy, the use and design of textiles, housing and role of community gardens, and even how an ageing population has implications for future sustainability practices and policies. Undoubtedly, the quest for sustainable futures amongst home economists reflects the three-decade long elevation of an ecological consciousness that environmental educators have pursued since the 1970s (Palmer, 1998).

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Strangely, however, little attention in environmental education, education for sustainable development and, now, home economics education, has been paid to how the household itself acts as a site of environmental education (Thompson, 1997). There is a paucity of empirically-driven understandings about how the home, the family and their historical, social and geographical contexts shape environmental understandings, interests, commitments and, most importantly, 'real and everyday' practices, with equally real personal, social and ecological consequences (Payne, in press). More precisely, while a lot is known about environmental concerns, knowledge, attitudes and values, little is known about the environmental actions and inactions of family members, how environmental learning occurs in the home, how consumer and consumer practices are explicitly and implicitly passed down by parents and 'received' or negotiated and resisted by their children. In other words, little is known about the role of parents, the family dynamic and the household culture in the intergenerational and social construction of environmental ethics and politics. Clearly, the family dynamic and its functioning is an obvious everyday medium in which 'pro' and 'anti' environmental actions, inactions and habits are 'lived', where sustainability

practices might be collectively constituted, ignored or rejected, and where a child's environmental learning (or not) occurs through his or her immersion in the traditions and behavioural norms of the family. Significantly, if there are few understandings about how the home and its family members 'live' the environmental problematic then, at best, only guesses can be made at the 'baggage' those children bring to school and community interventions. Pedagogical, curriculum and social policies targeting sustainability will, at worst, be ad-hoc, presumptuous and, in all likelihood, have a high risk of failing.

In addition, rarely are hard questions asked about how the household might actively promote non-sustainability, be it through unbridled consumerism and materialism, chronic wastefulness, the refusal to be resourceful, or even in parenting practices that mirror ignorance or apathy about, in this instance, the environmental problematic. Again, there are risky implications for educational, community, family and social policy formulation, development and implementation. Hard questions also need to be asked about what research (and theory) does not tell us. For example, The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2005) recently released its annual report on *Growing up in Australia: The longitudinal study of Australian children*. Its preliminary findings range across various issues: parents' education, income, work and family commitments, style of parenting, quality of neighbourhood, young children's diet, care, play and television, and so on. However, it is difficult to see where any of these quality of life issues for children also address the decline in environmental quality and increase in despoiled or toxic amenities in which the respondent families' live day-in, day-out. This silence in a national study of such magnitude and importance perpetuates the dominant anthropocentric (human-centredness) bias of contemporary western societies. In so doing, the findings and, eventually, policy recommendations marginalize the ecocentric logic of *oikos* and the ecology of human development (Brofenbrenner, 1979). There remains, therefore, significant potential to further undermine the quest and consciousness now demanded for a sustainable future.

This study of *Growing up green* partially 'corrects' the above absence of an