

# Sustaining Environmental Education: Celebrating Diversity

## *“ Empowering Educators: the role of experiential education? ”*

While this paper addresses the role of experiential education, it uses the example of “road safety” education to suggest that education requires a critical and empowering role in order to investigate what might otherwise appear to be reasonable and rational current practices and behaviours. “Road safety” in the context of this paper provides an opportunity to explore many issues that may not initially be associated readily with “Road safety” education. The paper therefore aims to illustrate the need to investigate the dangers of uncritical acceptance of current behaviours and practices and the potential of exploring beyond the current practices and behaviours to develop skills and empowerment as an essential component of education.

There is increasing awareness, indeed regulatory requirement, to provide accessibility for those with an access or mobility disability. The mobility impairments of people with a mobility disability taken as a general group are very similar in effect to the mobility and accessibility impairments of children. These disabilities can be characterised as varying degrees of inability to successfully undertake independent trips. To describe the conditions necessary for such trips, the phrase or formula, “safety+convenience” has been developed (Yeates, 2000) to describe both an image and an audit tool. This approach assumes that urban areas should provide “access for all”, that urban planning should meet the needs of people (Yeates, 1999). The challenge this creates however is the contrast between this image of a “safe+convenient” urban fabric and the role of “road safety” education. However a critical analysis of the role of “road safety” education suggests that in reality it is “road (un)safety” education, a classic example of Orwellian double-speak. “Road safety” education is a process that indoctrinates the vulnerability of people in an urban network of high speed traffic and it commences at a very young age.

The negative outcomes of the primacy of high speed traffic in urban areas are well known if less well understood. They include a range of global to local impacts including on health, mobility and equity caused by air pollution, noise, road danger, global warming, resource use, etc. Many of these types of impacts are the subjects of awareness and educational campaigns. However unlike the more obvious “environmental” concerns such as natural vegetation and wildlife, water quality and environmental amenity, it appears transport related and/or generated impacts are in the “too hard” basket. For example, programs such as “Water Watch” are well supported and provide funding for a range of activities from awareness raising to community testing of water quality to remediation programmes such as those funded by the Federal Government. Why is there no similar support for programmes to address air pollution or noise in urban areas? It appears that the combination of land use, urban design, health, environmental and transport issues is too complex.

It is important to begin to understand why such issues may be seen as complex and it is here that the perceived vulnerability of children can be seen to be constructed rather than inevitable. Kingham and Donohoe (2002) have found that children as young as four years old are aware of makes of cars and can evaluate drivers “class or status by the type of car they drive”. They argue that “(t)o be most effective, environmental education needs to take place from birth until five or six years of age, before children are left to form their own views, which will be influenced by their parents, the media and their toys.”

The issue of education as indoctrination raises interesting if problematic dilemmas. If there is a car culture or “love of cars” or just car dependence, whose role is it to challenge any perceived structural bias in the education of the next generation? Is it indoctrination to raise “other” views or alternatives? For these and other reasons, it appears that while environmental education and education for sustainability have been able to engage with and develop effective educational programmes to emphasise protection of the natural environment and to a lesser extent, address resource, pollution and social justice issues, one area in particular remains problematic - the question of the impacts of current transport and land planning practices on children.

Increasing research confirms that children in particular suffer considerably from current practices eg being driven to and from school. The impacts range across child development, health, education, personal responsibility and freedom. The challenge for environmental educators “at the cutting edge” is to engage with those current dominant practices that are known to be contrary to the practices derived from other areas of environmental education yet their hegemonic nature seems to render them immune from critical examination.

The challenge for current educators is to reduce the “rhetoric-reality gap” between current practices and those resulting from an analysis based on sustainability, health and social justice ... “access for all”. In this way, those who might wish to walk or cycle could be encouraged to choose to do so and in so doing, provide an exemplary model for others. Encouraging diverse solutions in practice can make explicit what are often accepted, uncritically endorsed, current dominant practices and unquestioned assumptions about individual freedom of choice, in this case, within a dominant paradigm of almost total car dependence.

The following may provide some useful starting points.

- As part of my Masters degree at Griffith University, we developed and later convened workshops to investigate the reaction of workshop participants to the use of selections of deliberately selected children's books that emphasised "green" issues. We asked whether they were considered "biased". Most thought not. This is a useful starting point as early childhood education is, as shown above, an important stage of awareness raising and culturalisation. However it is also a period when both the young child and adults, often covering three generations of interests and experience, can enjoy discussion and arguably, education, generated from children's books. If the books have a "green" message, or raise "green" questions, is that a problem? If so, why? If the problem is that issues are raised that question current practice, is that a problem? Or in then choosing not to address those issues, are we as educators contributing to the inculcation or indoctrination either inadvertently or deliberately?
- While the issue is the subject of considerable intense and interesting international debate, there is concern that children do inherently need, and many wish to have, independent mobility - the opportunity and responsibility to explore, to learn, to develop skills and responsibility, to learn about and make assessments of the differences between dangers and risks, to enjoy exploring where they live. Similar work has found similar outcomes in Australia (Cunningham et al, 1996) and New Zealand (Tranter and Pawson, 2001). European discussion on this topic suggests there is a discernible class of "back seat" children, whose development is different and appears associated with a lack of experiencing a range of experiences of both independent and escorted mobility by a variety of modes through being driven by car or otherwise constrained.
- There is a similar ongoing debate about the source of car dependence and how if at all the issue can be addressed. Of relevance to the Australian context with the dominance of traffic engineering in the management of roads and traffic, the UK has been the source of a number of studies that sought to address growing concerns about the impacts of urban management on children. Perhaps the most "notorious" of the UK "campaigns to educate children in particular to respect roads" was the national "*One false move*" campaign by the UK Department of Transport "which effectively threatened children with death if they behaved normally for their age" (Bannon and Costello, 1997). More recently, the concept of "Road Danger Reduction" promoted by the Road Danger Reduction Forum, extensive implementation of "Safe Routes to Schools" promoted by Sustrans and the effect of traffic speed management on road danger promoted by the Slower Speeds Initiative have not only demonstrated the wide range of choices for the future of urban (and rural) areas, they have created a large number of opportunities for children to engage with those who control the urban and road environments in the UK.
- There is increasing concern about national healthiness at the whole of population level. Campaigns such as "*Active Australia*" and the recent report "Getting Australia Active" (Bauman et al, 2002) confirm the need for incidental, regular, daily exercise. According to Bannon and Costello, "(t)ransport has always been a fundamental human activity which, until recently, was associated with the expenditure of significant amounts of physical energy. However, with motorisation, we have created a different physical environment and thus lifestyle, of which the effects on human health require recognition. The lack of potential for exercise now built into the lives of the population has a large part to play in the recent decline in the quality of health of the population. Parents who take little exercise also pass this habit on to their children, but most adults too, perform trips without the expenditure of any significant energy. The lack of fitness of young people is of particular concern." The health-transport-environment relationship provides not only a topic to address more active transport, it also allows consideration of global issues such as Greenhouse and Global Warming and global-social issues such as comparing the health and transport of third world citizens with our own and the contributions both make to Global Warming.
- In Italy, based on the idea of involving users in consultation or participation, a number of projects over the last 10 years have sought to provide children with a structured and supported opportunity to assist in achieving urban areas they value through "The Children's City" project; with models such as Children's Councils and Children's Participation in Planning (Alparone and Rissotto, 2001). Tonucci and Rissotto (2001) state that the projects "...confirm the children's capacity to identify the city's problems as they emerge and to propose solutions that are often innovative or useful for all members of the population." As children are rarely if ever consulted on these issues, this is useful confirmation of the inter-generational responsibilities inherent in discourse about "sustainability", in particular noting that "(t)hrough the UK Governments National Curriculum, children in Key Stage 1 (five to seven years of age) are taught to express views on how the environment is changing, for example through increasing traffic" (Kingham and Donohoe, 2002). Allowing children to influence decisions about such matters is indeed innovative.

The research, projects and experiences reported above suggest that there is ample opportunity for environmental educators to facilitate and participate in educational projects and processes which encourage others to not only become more aware but to actively participate and experience and demonstrate new or different behaviours. Further, "(w)hile environmentalists may debate the rate at which the 'paradigm shift' is occurring and the effectiveness of different strategies for social change, there is wide agreement that education has an important role in transforming values and empowering people to participate in environmental improvement and protection" (Fien, 1993).

Another similar view is expressed by Orr who states “(w)hen the actions of educated people ‘ruin the world’, for whatever cause, it is time to ask what went wrong in their education... The challenge before educators is that of developing in themselves and their students, mindsets and habits that enable people to live sustainably on a planet with a biosphere” (in Egan and Orr, 1992).

Children experience the urban area quite differently to adults and it seems that many would like to experience it differently to the way it appears adults would like it to be. While children’s mobility is constrained, their imagination is not. In a recent publication, “Kids on the move” (EC, 2002), the European Commission has provided an excellent challenge to allow kids to “move” both physically and metaphorically. In what is a useful closing footnote to this workshop, “Kids on the move” reports a national competition for ideas aimed at reducing use of cars in the UK. The event was sponsored by the Royal Automobile Club. The children who won the second prize of 1500 EUR suggested parking meters in the school car parks to raise funds for more sustainable modes ... walking and cycling!

The challenge for environmental education is to engage with experiential practice; to not only educate about the issues but to experience both the problems and the solutions and to engage in “transforming values and empowering people” (Fien, 1993), whether in a formal or an informal setting and by personal commitment and experience. By challenging current practice from a critical perspective, any ideology or rhetoric can be made explicit and where appropriate, as in the case of “road safety”, shown to be “twisted logic” (Yeates, 2002).

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[\* Many of the references have been selected because they provide access to a line of debate, a useful reference for activities or they are available on the web.]

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