

# Education for Sustainability in New South Wales, Australia

From their research into teachers' perceptions of Education for Sustainability, **Neil Taylor** and **Subhashni Nathan** report grounds for hope that there is, in new South Wales, a group of well-informed, committed teachers, who are willing to take a stand on issues of social justice within their teaching.

As the driest continent on Earth, Australia is facing many issues of sustainability, many of them related to water resources. These were highlighted in *Australia: State of the Environment* (1996), the first ever independent and comprehensive report on the state of Australia's environment, prepared for the Australian Federal Government by the State of the Environment Advisory Council. The report highlighted a number of serious concerns that needed to be tackled with determination if Australia was to achieve the goal of ecologically sustainable development. Some of the issues identified in the report were:

- 1 enhanced greenhouse effect
- 2 consumerism
- 3 social justice and equity issues
- 4 the loss of bio-diversity and the continued destruction of habitat
- 5 the depletion of river systems and ground-water aquifers
- 6 high rates of land clearance and vegetation loss
- 7 poor quality of soils
- 8 land degradation, loss of remnant vegetation and air pollution in cities
- 9 substantial adverse impacts on water quality in the areas of stormwater, sewage and other forms of waste disposal
- 10 invasive plants and animals posing a serious and increasing threat to native ecosystems in rural, urban and marine environments
- 11 rising salinity
- 12 waste management
- 13 population.

## A new education initiative

According to the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (2001), teachers have a responsibility to ensure that these issues are addressed across key learning areas and in teaching and learning programs. To encourage this process, the Department of Education and Training has developed a new Environmental Education Policy (ibid) that moves away from traditional education about the environment to a much stronger focus on education for the environment, in effect Education for Sustainability (EfS). The policy report argues that students should be given the opportunity to examine sustainability

issues in the context of the natural, built, social and cultural environments and, where appropriate, to take action. Thus, for example, students might be given the opportunity to examine the major causes of salinity and discuss how this serious economic and environmental phenomenon has been exacerbated by human activity such as land clearing, before looking at ways of reducing or even reversing, its effects. They might also become directly involved by joining an organisation such as Landcare, an Australian NGO, active in the 'battle' against salinity. The Environmental Education Policy is mandatory for all public schools in NSW, however, its successful implementation and its uptake by schools outside the public sector will depend on teachers with good knowledge of and commitment to ecological sustainability.

## Teachers' knowledge and perceptions of EfS

This article reports a summary of the findings of an exploratory study involving a series of interviews conducted with primary and secondary teachers in regional (rural) NSW, in an attempt to determine their perceptions of EfS. The study was conducted prior to the arrival of the new policy document in schools, but it provided insight into teachers' belief systems about sustainability and their views on the benefits and difficulties involved in delivering EfS. The policy is intended to be holistic and involve the entire community of each school involved, however, its successful implementation depends largely on the extent to which teachers understand the concept of Education for Sustainability and the importance they place upon this concept.

All the teachers were self-identified as having an interest in environmental education. Patton (1990) points out that a convenience sample such as this is appropriate provided it represents a target group relevant to the inquiry – as is the case here. All the teachers had visited the regional environmental education centre either with classes or to collect resource materials and had been in the profession for at least five years. A mix of six primary teachers (4 female and 2 male) and seven secondary teachers (5 female and 2 male) drawn from science, geography and the earth sciences, provided an opportunity to explore the issue of holism in EfS, which is potentially more problematic at secondary level. The schools represented a mixture of private and public institutions. All the private schools were connected to specific religious organisations within Australia.

## Summarised findings

Surprisingly, given that the group comprised teachers with a commitment to environmental education, relatively few of the participants (3 out of 13) reported being familiar with the concept of EfS. This may reflect the fact that the concept is relatively new, or as Bourn (2002) suggests, it may be because environmental educationalists in Australia typically come from a strong natural environment focus. Whatever the reason, there would appear to be a strong case for promoting EfS more vigorously in Australian schools. However although most of the participants had not heard of the term EfS, they generally had an intuitive understanding of this concept and how it might differ from traditional environmental education. As one participant put it:

*I gather EfS is a broader approach. It puts people squarely in the syllabus and the impact of humans on ecosystems and how do we cope with this exponentially rising population. Environmental education is perhaps more narrow, perhaps compartmentalises and it might be seen as just issue-based like greenhouse or ozone. In strict sort of environmental education and science we wouldn't include a political dimension. We wouldn't talk about World Bank loans to countries and their implications.*

Furthermore, all the participants believed that issues of social justice needed to be addressed by teachers when dealing with environmental issues and many claimed to be including such issues in their current practice. As one teacher commented: 'We talk about things like the Kyoto Protocol and why the western world has to cut its emissions within a certain number of years whereas the third world is given a bit more time', while another stated: 'I look at issues of consumption. I'm always asking 'Who uses more, a child born in Nigeria or a child born in North America?' Even those teachers who were sceptical about ever achieving the goal of sustainability still believed that education offered the best hope.

The teachers also demonstrated a high level of political literacy and, unlike teachers in other studies (eg. Cross, 1998; Summers et al. 2000), there were no indications that these teachers were deficient in their understanding of key environmental and social issues and how these might be interrelated. Furthermore, they appeared to embrace the notion that education should not simply focus on environmental knowledge and attitudes, but should influence students' decision making in relation to the environment.

There was general consensus that EfS should be delivered across the curriculum, although those working in the secondary sector confirmed the difficulties of achieving this effectively. Teachers in this study were acutely aware of the dichotomy created by the holistic nature of the problem of sustainability and the structural arrangements of subject divisions within secondary schools, as Cross (1998) found in his study of teachers in the USA and Scotland. In fact, some teachers felt that it was unrealistic of the government to

insist on a cross-curricular approach while maintaining those structures that impede such an approach, implicitly echoing a call by Fien (2001) for a restructuring of education towards sustainability. While this is unlikely to happen, the introduction of the new Environmental Education Policy does appear to offer a considerable window of opportunity for the effective delivery of EfS, particularly as it is intended to be holistic not only in the curricular sense but also in relation to other school policies such as purchasing and waste disposal. Within the constraints of present school structures, the policy is designed to engage the whole school and the wider community in thinking about sustainability.

The manner in which schools actually implement this policy will depend on the knowledge and commitment of the staff involved which will ultimately have considerable impact on the promotion of EfS in NSW. One of the major problems facing the NSW government is that the policy is only mandatory in government schools which cater for around 70% of the student population.

Nevertheless, this study indicated that within regional NSW there is a body of teachers with sufficient knowledge of and commitment to EfS, who appear not to be constrained by conservative forces and are willing to take a stand on issues of social justice within their teaching, to allow for optimism in respect of the policy implementation, even in those schools where it is not mandatory. If this is replicated throughout the state then the future for the new policy looks promising. However, it is to be hoped that the policy will be embraced by all teachers and not be marginalised, relying on a small number of innovators.

## References

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