“Converting the bubble wrap generation into eco warriors”: results on the effectiveness of a co-signed protocol

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Abstract

In the face of a global environmental crisis, schools are at the forefront of the campaign to influence the young on how to live more sustainably. However, paradoxically, the very children that they are attempting to convert into eco warriors are being bubble wrapped by their parents and the institutions that are attempting to convert them. This paper will analyse the evolvement of environmental education in Australia, and the dilemma that it faces in trying to equip the bubble wrap generation with action competence. One means of empowering the young to become eco warriors is through positioning them as change agents, influencing their families on ways to live more sustainably. This paper will explore a research project that tests the effectiveness of a Protocol, co-signed by a group of fourteen-year-old students and their families. The findings of this research shed light on the ability of a Protocol to bring about intergenerational influence between students and their families; the reception that such a tool has on the students and family members; and the implications for further research and practices.

The rise of environmental education: giving kids a voice

Recently, I was driving with my eleven-year-old son near our home in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, when our conversation turned to the drought-gnarled countryside outside our car windows. I attempted to broach the topic of global warming and in response he uttered the words, ‘Dad, you can replant flowers, but you can’t replant the earth’. The insightfulness of the statement struck me on two levels: firstly because it captured so clearly the essence of the problem that humanity faces. Quite simply, when all of the resources on the planet are gone, many are gone forever; and secondly, it came from a person so young. If I was still unsure of how the youth felt about the earth’s predicament, I was left in no doubt after hearing Caitlin Sherrey-Dadd, a seventeen-year-old student from northern New South Wales.

“I, as a young person in this world have every right
to address anyone on these issues, as they so concern my future.
I, as a young person have the right
to be heard by the people in power over the kind of conditions
they are creating for my future”
(Sherrey-Dadd, 2009)

These emotive and poignant words were meant as a challenge to the environmental educators gathered at the conference at which she was speaking. The crux of Caitlin’s speech was a plea to adults to listen to the voices of the young, as they have as much right as anyone else to be heard on the issues surrounding global warming. Twenty years earlier, Caitlin’s sentiment was being echoed on a far grander stage, at the United Nations General Assembly, New York. The leaders of the world agreed that it was time that the social, economic, civic, cultural and political rights of children were legally protected ("Convention on the rights of the child," 1989). Despite the rhetoric, the history of environmental education in Australia has indeed been long, winding and rocky (Gough, 2006). Greenhall (cited in Robottom, 1987) describes it as a game of snakes and ladders in which every positive move by the government and education fraternity in regards to the field of environmental education was possibly – and usually – met with a problem which brings it back to its original status.
Within Australia there have been many environmental education programs introduced into the schools and there is overwhelming evidence to support the fact that these programs have created positive changes in not only the attitudes of the students but also in the general wellbeing of the schools (Armstrong, Sharpley, & Malcolm, 2004). Primary schools are beginning to embrace whole-school approaches to environmental education in which they include emotional and enjoyment factors into their programs (Skamp, 2009). In response to what Louv (2005) describes as nature deficit disorder in modern children, schools are looking for real life experiences for their children to enhance learning and foster closer relationships with nature.

Creating eco warriors

Educators have an obligation to create students who are able to identify that the environment needs their care, be willing to do something about it and finally, have the skills to do something about it. Bertolini (2007, p. 9) believes that the 'students of tomorrow need to be flexible, adaptable, self-generative, confident, responsible and skilled in learning how to learn'. Malone and Marr (2007) challenge teachers to treat students as equals in their educational journey, while Rogovin (1998) espouses the immersion approach, in which the students are positioned as researchers in their own right, able to identify issues and solutions, enabling change in their local communities. The ultimate gauge of success of any environmental education program is how effective it is in being able to enable its students to transfer their enthusiasm and skills beyond the walls of the school into their homes and communities. This is the frontier on which environmental educators need to focus. Children do have a right to be change agents and leaders in the fight to save the planet, and schools can provide the launching pads for these young eco-warriors. Jensen and Schnack (2006) argue that it is the role of the schools to create ‘action competent’ students who are capable of taking action on behalf of the environment. Jensen concludes that it is the responsibility of educators to not only influence the behaviour of children but more importantly to empower them to become critical individuals, competent to take action to preserve their natural environments and improve their communities (2004).

There have been several studies done on the effectiveness of environmental education programs in prompting intergenerational influence from children to their parents and other family members. Armstrong, Sharpley and Malcolm (2004) carried out a study on an environmental education program which had been installed at two schools (primary and secondary) in rural Victoria. The program on which the researchers based their results was the Waste Wise Schools Program, funded by Eco Recycle Victoria. The primary purpose of the study was to measure the intergenerational impact of the programs and to identify the factors that influenced their results. The programs allowed students to become involved in practical, hands-on activities such as waste quality monitoring and conducting waste and letter surveys. The results were very encouraging, showing that between 50% and 60% of the parents reported that they had changed their thinking as a result of their children being involved in the Waste Wise program (Armstrong et al., 2004, p. 5). Ballantyne, Fien and Packer (2001a) conducted an extensive study of the intergenerational impact of six environmental education programs in nine metropolitan primary and secondary schools in Queensland. The data revealed that 44% of the of the students interviewed spoke to their parents ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a lot’ about what they had learnt in the environmental education program. The extent to which students enjoyed the program influenced the frequency of the discussions, however, the researchers emphasise that these discussions were often limited to the program itself rather than a discussion of an environmental issue and consequential environmental action.

The two aforementioned research projects show that it is possible to promote intergenerational influence if the environmental education program involves co-learning between the students and
their parents, includes activities that the children enjoy (Armstrong et al., 2004), has an action component in the project, and shows that the children can make a difference in their local environment (Ballantyne, Fien and Packer, 2001b). However, to create eco warriors, schools not only need to have in place sound environmental education programs, but more importantly, tools to enable these children to take their knowledge and enthusiasm into their homes and communities, influencing the attitudes and behaviour of their families.

**When two worlds collide**

While environmental educators may have a lofty vision for the students of Australia, there remains a complex, complicating factor that clouds their path to success. Most children currently in Australian schools were born between 1995 and 2009 and are members of Generation Z (GENERATION.Z, 2010). Unfortunately, research has shown that the children of this generation are ill prepared to become eco warriors.

Palmer (2006) argues that the children currently in primary and secondary schools in the western world are being poisoned by ‘toxic childhood syndrome’, through which they are being deprived of opportunities for play and firsthand experience. Malone (2007) has conducted extensive research on and with the children who make up Generation Z in Australia and overseas and she argues that many parents are restricting their children’s movements to such an extent that they will not have the social, psychological, cultural or environmental knowledge and skills to be able to negotiate freely in their environment. 92% of these children live in urban environments and the majority of them lead highly adult-organised and controlled lives. O’leary (1998, cited in Malone, 2007, p. 516) adds that for these members of Generation Z the world is depicted as a dark, dangerous and high risk place. As a consequence of this fear, parents are restricting their children’s movement, particularly as pedestrians and cyclists and as a result the children are becoming less independent and resilient. The very reaction to the perceived dangers that these children face could be placing them at an even greater risk of losing a sense of independence and autonomy; key attributes needed for survival in a fast changing world. The image of an eco warrior is a young person who bravely fights for the rights of the earth, yet Gould (cited in Gaylie, 2009) questions how children will have the desire to save nature if they do not love nature. Sir David Attenborough (cited in Gray, 2010) laments the health and safety culture that discourages children from roaming the countryside and discovering nature. This is an alarming development given that one of the common hallmarks of environmental activism is a prolonged exposure to nature as a child (Chawla, 1999).

Coupled with this is a tension that exists in Australian education. Australia has determined that schools form the front line of the offensive to educate children about how to protect the planet, however, Miriam (2007) emphasises that while there is a movement towards giving students a greater voice in their learning, there remains a school structure that is based on traditional adult assumptions. Also, at the same time that schools are attempting to enable students to enjoy more time out of the classroom, they are being forced to comply with strict Occupational, Health and Safety guidelines which is not always supported by appropriate release time and resources to enable the schools to meet the goals of these guidelines (Esler, 2006). While Gualano (2005) insists that it is the school principal’s basic, even moral responsibility to ensure the safety of his or her students and staff, Potts (2006) reports that there is a difference between the realistic dangers faced every day in the school grounds and the sensationalised versions of these dangers offered by the media. He suggests that the popular press is keen to report schools as dangerous places and claims that schools are in fact seen by the public as more dangerous than any other time in history. For those teachers attempting to manage the sustainability initiatives in their schools, on top of their other mandated duties, there is also a risk of burnout (Whitehouse, 2008). At a time when educators should be
exploring ways to enhance their students’ levels of action competence and sense of citizenship, they are instead being bogged down by governmental regulations.

While there is no doubt that educators are teaching children about environmental issues, Murdoch (2006) describes the ability of children to transfer generalisations as being at a higher level of the learning process. Educators need to focus more earnestly and explicitly on how best to position their students to transfer generalisations learnt in the classrooms into their homes and communities. Most research in the field of environmental education has concentrated on the effectiveness of environmental education programs in changing the students’ attitude and behaviour. More research is needed which scrutinises the interaction between the students and their families, when generalisation has been achieved and how best to link the students to their families so that what they are learning in the schools can be transferred into the home environment. This would indeed provide students with the opportunity to become eco warriors.

Using a co-signed protocol to encourage and support young change agents

Title and nature of the project

The doctoral project is titled ‘Children as environmental change agents: using a negotiated protocol to bring about or support environmentally responsible behaviour in the family home’. The Protocol is a document on which the students, parents and siblings write a list of actions that they will undertake over a period of three months in order to live more sustainably. It is a qualitative case study involving six fourteen-year-old students and their families, and involved four interviews with the students and three interviews with the members of their families over a period of five months.

Purpose and significance of the study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the ability of a co-signed Protocol to assist students to influence their families’ environmental behaviour. The Protocol was designed to provide a conduit between the students and their families, shedding light on how best to foster intergenerational interactions; the resultant attitudinal and behavioural changes that took place; the depth and longevity of the changes and the factors that influenced the interactions and success or failure of the protocol. Its significance lies in that this study positions children as leading stakeholders in the design of the project and the data generation, and examines the challenges of being a change agent from the perspective of a child in his or her own home.

Data and implications

While in its infancy, the analysis of the data has revealed some enlightening themes worthy of closer analysis. What stood above everything else is the willingness of the students to be leaders in attempting to change their families’ environmental practices. They saw this as an important cause, worthy of their efforts. As one of the students said, ‘You are never going to say no to something that is going to help. You want to do it’. If educators want to assist the young to become eco warriors they must give those interested an opportunity to make a difference outside of their classrooms. The participants in this project – 25% of the outdoor education class from which they volunteered– embraced the chance to make a difference for the sake of the earth.

The initial part of the project saw the students designing a protocol to take home. Two key issues that arose from the meetings with the participants in these early stages of the projects were their willingness to take ownership of the Protocol and their sense of appreciation at having been given
the opportunity to design the Protocol and take it into their households. Part of the reason for their enthusiasm—given that they had only recently been introduced to the research project and they had not had an opportunity to participate in any of the environmental education program that had been designed for them—was perhaps that the group work was not attached to any formal assessment task. Galton and Hargreaves (2009) argue that students will often feel more comfortable and therefore commit more to a group discussion if they are not weighed down by the prospect of the session being part of the teacher’s assessment schedule. The students had been assured that their participation in the research would have no bearing what so ever on their school report and this certainly would play a role in creating a relaxed atmosphere in the sessions. What stood out here was their willingness and insightfulness in carrying out this task. They analysed the prototype of the Protocol that had been given to them and made significant alterations to the design so that it would best suit their needs in their homes. All of the students revealed that they appreciated being given an opportunity to design something for an important cause.

Mackenzie (2005) asserts that children are on the whole ‘familialised’, being seen as no more than dependents of adult family members, and I was interested to gauge the reaction of the parents to their children bringing home the Protocol for them to sign. Every parent interviewed responded positively, with one parent’s words capturing the essence of their feelings, ‘…I thought that it was fantastic. It is not often that things at school grab a child’s attention enough to bring it home, and this certainly did. He was quite keen and excited about the whole project’. Another parent had been initially resistant to the idea of participating in the project, changed his attitude when he realised that it was important to his son that he be involved. He said, ‘If he grabs the ball and starts running with it, I will have to follow’. The project highlights the importance of breaking the traditional model in which children have been perceived as invisible and subsumed under institutions such as families and education. Parents are willing to embrace child-driven initiatives such as the protocol, offering educators a means of providing students authentic opportunities to become eco warriors.

The first series of interviews demonstrated that both the students and their families were willing to work together to institute the protocol in their homes. The question remained as to how successful they would be in negotiating the terms of the Protocol within their complex family environments. Most of the families overcame this hurdle seamlessly, with only one of the families struggling to find the time to have a formal meeting to discuss the Protocol. Interestingly, the student in this family had forewarned me of the possibility of this occurring, as his father was very rarely home from work in time for the evening meal. All of the participants reported that the process of setting up the Protocol was a good thing to do as a family, with one parent saying that he would probably convert the household over to a green electricity supplier because he ‘…was going to have to front up to the kids saying “Dad, why haven’t you done this?”’. Most of the families held formal meetings to negotiate the terms of the Protocol, giving all members of the family a say in the design, while five out of the six families planned to share the responsibility of driving the Protocol. Sprey (1975, cited in Flurry & Burns, 2005) describes this as a reciprocal exchange process. Each member of the family came to the negotiating table with similar but not identical perceptions (French & Raven, 1959, cited in Flurry & Burns, 2005), and appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard in the negotiation phase. This is an important finding, as it confirms my belief that in order to support young eco warriors we need to provide interventions such as the Protocol. This will not only raise their profile in matters to do with sustainable behaviour within their home environments, but will also raise the expectation that they will take an active part in the process of achieving the goals set by them and their families.

After the negotiation and signing of the Protocol, I left the students and their families for a period of three months before interviewing them again to ascertain how successful it had been in supporting
and improving the level of their pro-environmental behaviour. The Protocol was highly successful in changing the attitudes of the participants and in the short term had significant impact on the behaviour of all of the families. As time went on four of the families reported that they struggled to maintain their motivation, identifying busy life styles as a major contributing factor. All participants, however, felt that the protocol had assisted them to do something practical to help the environment, and that for the first time they had been speaking openly about environmental issues as a family. Interestingly, the two families that claimed the highest success rate in achieving their goals over a period of three months were those in which the students had remained actively involved in the process. The adults from the other four families reported that they had taken on the leadership roles, as their children lost motivation, causing them considerable frustration.

Conclusion

Despite the desire by Governments, schools and teachers to give children a voice in such important matters as sustainability, the very students that they are targeting are being bubble wrapped into a state of helplessness by these same institutions and parents (Malone, 2007). Converting the bubble wrap generation into eco warriors would appear to be a mission impossible unless researchers and educators begin to focus their attention on how to transfer the learning that is taking place in the schools into the family homes. By creating such tools as the Protocol, children will be given an authentic chance to influence their parents and siblings on such crucial issues as how to look after the world and its resources. My research findings corroborate this theory, with the students helping to change the attitudes and behaviour in their homes. Wider research is needed to build on the knowledge gained from this case study, however, the data from this project shows that interventions such as the Protocol will assist educators greatly in converting the bubble wrap generation into eco warriors.

References


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