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Changing Politics for Changing Times: Rethinking Research Stakeholders and Strategies for Environmental Education

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Abstract

The history of environmental education in Australia is political, and fraught with power battles. Indeed, environmental education in Australia (as in many places elsewhere) has always been political. The early calls for environmental education came as a response to the perceived growing environmental crises on the 1960s. At this time, it was seen as a scientific and social priority by scientists, environmentalists and academics, but it was not seen as an educational priority by education departments. Rather, environmental educators were treated as yet another adjectival education lobby group wanting space in an already overcrowded curriculum. There was a time when most state education authorities were engaging with environmental education, but the politicisation of the placement of sustainability as (an optional) cross-curriculum priority has enabled avoidance of the politics of environmental issues and thereby a political stance that is tacitly supporting the status quo of the current neoliberal political systems. This article argues that the times have changed and so has the nature of politics and power bases, and it is time to rethink approaches to environmental education research and recognise that the politics of the past may not be the politics of the future as the generations grow different.

Keywords: Climate action; environmental education; nihilists; politics; women

Introduction

Environmental problems are social problems as well as ecological problems, and as such require political solutions. As Daniel Vidart argued in the wake of the 1975 UNESCO Belgrade Workshop on Environmental Education, "awareness of environmental problems is social awareness rather than ecological awareness. Such problems will be solved through collective action aimed at eradicating the social and economic causes of the degradation of the human environment." (1978, p. 476) Sadly, the education associated with addressing environmental problems is often seen as too political by education systems and thus environmental issues are frequently marginalised or sanitised when considered in school curricula, and, as I discuss in this article, fifty years on there is little indication that much has changed, except perhaps in the context of climate change.

Environmental education is also intended to be action oriented. As argued by UNESCO, it "should adopt a critical approach to encourage careful awareness of the various factors involved in the situation," involve learners in planning their learning experiences, "utilise diverse learning environments and a broad array of educational approaches to teaching/learning" and "focus on current and potential environmental situations" (1980, p. 27). This was not seen as being able to

implemented through the traditional approach to education, "which is too abstract and fragmentary [and] has been unsuccessful in preparing individuals to face the changing complexity of reality," but rather through "an education centred on the practical problems of the environment" which "should help the public to question its misconceptions concerning the problems of the environment" and adopt "a critical approach to encourage careful analysis and awareness of the various factors involved in the situation" (UNESCO, 1980, pp. 26–27). This critical and action orientation has been problematic for many education systems, and stakeholders who influence governments. As Vidart pointed out in the next sentence to the previous quote: "The political aspects of this search for solutions may give rise to conflicts of various kinds. One such conflict, and not the least, is the collision between the educational system and the private interests which operate in alliance with the powers of the State." (1978, p. 476) The widespread adoption of neoliberalism by governments and institutions has certainly had its impact on the implementation of environmental education, as has been clearly argued by David Hursh, Joseph Henderson and David Greenwood (2015) and other authors in that special issue of *Environmental Education Research*:

> . . . neoliberalism seeks to transform environmental issues into economic ones, stripping them of other possible senses and ways of thinking and acting in response to them . . . Environmental issues and crises are turned into opportunities for entrepreneurialism and technological innovation, rather than a systematic political and cultural rethinking and reworking of our relationships with the environment, including our fellow earthbound inhabitants, human, and otherwise. (Hursh et al, 2015, p. 308)

Neoliberalism and other political developments are part of the changing times that need to be considered as we rethink environmental education research stakeholders and strategies.

Background

The early history of environmental education in Australia has been documented elsewhere (see, for example, Gough, 1997; Greenall Gough, 1991; Greenall, 1987) and will not be repeated here, except to note the political aspects of its recognition by state and territory education authorities.

Concerns about the state of the environment in the 1960s led to many actions at international and national levels in the early 1970s. While the Australian and state governments were willing to legislate regarding air and water quality – for example, Victoria's Environment Protection Authority was established in 1971 under the Environment Protection Act 1970 – they were slower to respond educationally. This point was supported by Geoff Spring who, in commenting on the reception of environmental education as a priority area for the then recently created national Curriculum Development Centre in 1974, noted that some Council members "felt that environmental education was not an educational priority in the way that it was a political priority nor in the way that many academics felt it was a cultural priority for Australia" (as quoted in Greenall, 1981, p. 136). That it was a political priority was reflected in the 1973 Australian Labor Party platform statement:

> This (environmental education) policy aims to facilitate public participation and awareness of the need to preserve the environment by One funding and expanding environment [sic] education and information programs; Two, further developing the environmental education function in the curriculum development centre. (as quoted in Langmore, 1987, p. 7)

Some states (Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania (only in draft form)) released environmental education policies in the mid 1970s. These may have been prompted by the Curriculum Development Centre's activities in this area (Greenall and Womersley, 1977), or by

the 1975 Australian National Commission for UNESCO seminar on education and the human environment (Linke, 1977). However, as Greenall (1987, p. 11) noted about its status in the mid 1980s, "Environmental education was interpreted as education *in* the environment and education *about* the environment . . . [and] very few of these activities had attitudinal or action components, 'education *for* the environment'." In addition, none of the policies gave environmental education "a particularly high priority, and few provided much support in the form of resources" (p. 11).

Environmental education policies

In the lead-up to World Environment Day in 1989, *ozEEnews*, the newsletter of the Australian Association for Environmental Education, headlined that Stuart Littlemore of ABC-TV had described the electronic media's coverage of environmental issues as "flavour of the month" (Greenall Gough, 1989, p. 1). At that time, environmental education seemed to be riding the same wave. For example, in addition to the state environmental education policies noted above, the need for Australian school students to learn about the environment was included in the first national education declaration, the 1989 *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* where one of the 10 goals was, "an understanding of, and concern for, balanced development and the global environment and complex environmental and social challenges" (Australian Education Council, 1989, p. 1). Three other states also produced environmental education policy statements in the late 1980s (New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria) and the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory released theirs in the mid 1990s, associated with the proposed introduction of the Australian national curriculum (Gough, 1997).

In the late 1980s, the Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training was active in environmental education. They sponsored a Bicentennial Australian Studies Schools Project Bulletin on "Education for the Australian Environment" (Fien, 1988) and they released a national environmental education strategy, "Learning for Our Environment" in 1989, which involved making $400 000 in grants for environmental education activities (Anon, 1990). However, nothing further was heard of this strategy (Greenall Gough, 1991), and all future Australian government environmental education strategies have come from environment departments (Environment Australia, 2000; Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH), 2005; Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA), 2009).

Although the policy statements were not overtly encouraging of student action, in the early 1990s some Australian environmental educators and researchers were promoting critical reflection and action activities around environmental issues (see, for example, Fien, 1993; Greenall Gough & Robottom, 1993; Murdoch, 1993). However, they were in the minority and the pressures towards an Australian Curriculum, thwarted in the early 1990s but successful in the next decade, returned the focus to more traditional curricula and pedagogy.

Environment Australia's (2000) strategy, *Environmental education for a sustainable future: National action plan,* complemented the 1999 *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*. This Declaration moved recognition of complex environmental and social challenges to the preamble, and added a new goal, that students should have "an understanding of, and concern for, stewardship of the natural environment, and the knowledge and skills to contribute to ecologically sustainable development" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1999, Goal 1.7). This was an expansion of goal in the *Hobart Declaration*, although it was still missing an action component. In contrast, the Environment Australia (2000, p. 5) strategy was concerned with achieving changed behaviour in support of a sustainable environment: "A key element in the National Action Plan is a move from an emphasis on awareness raising to an emphasis on providing people with the knowledge, values and skills to actually make a difference to the protection and conservation of Australia's environment."

As well as establishing a National Environmental Education Council, under the action plan funding was provided for implementing the sustainable schools programme (Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative [AuSSI]) nationally (Larri & Colliver, 2020), and for publishing a national statement on environmental education for schools (Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2005). An aim of AuSSI was that, "by participating in a learning by doing process, students achieve a better understanding of the world in which they live, and have opportunities to help create a more sustainable future" (Larri & Colliver, 2020, p. 68), and a similar philosophy was incorporated into the national statement on environmental education for schools. Both emphasised a whole school approach. Although a second national action plan for education for sustainability (DEWHA, 2009) was released, the Australian Government withdrew support for the plan and its associated initiatives in early 2010 and there have not been any further action plans.

The 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* expanded on the environmental content of the Adelaide Declaration and recognised the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change. Here, the preamble noted new demands on Australian education, including "Complex environmental, social and economic pressures such as climate change that extend beyond national borders pose unprecedented challenges, requiring countries to work together in new ways" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 5). The goal to accompany this statement was for students to become "active and informed members of citizens [who] . . . work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments" (p. 9), and the associated action was a resolution that "a focus on environmental sustainability will be integrated across the curriculum" (p. 14). Although sustainability has been included as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum since its inception, and despite attempts to remove it (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014), its placement within the curriculum is haphazard, it generally develops a shallow understanding of sustainability, if it is taught to students at all (Nicholls, 2017). However, as discussed in the next section, we are in many ways lucky that it is still there.

The most recent national statement on goals for schooling is the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, which replaced the Melbourne Declaration in December 2019. This simply sees education as preparing "young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges" (Education Council, 2019, p. 2), and repeats the above goal from the Melbourne Declaration. It is silent on climate change, and reduces consideration of sustainability in the curriculum to encouraging students to "engage with complex ethical issues and concepts such as sustainability" (p. 15).

Recognition of environmental education has waxed and waned across the three decades of related policy statements discussed in this section. Back in 1995, the *ozEEnews* editor and state delegates of the Australian Association for Environmental Education (Watterson et al, 1995, p. 1) summarised their experiences this way:

> One of the main barriers facing attempts to promote consistent government responses on environmental education in the fluctuating and sometimes cyclical nature of public policy priorities. Our lobbyists have often succeeded in having initiatives announced only to see these gains eroded by lack of will to implement them, funding changes, or changes of government. A frequent result is the provision of government programs that are fragmented, variable and often short term.

This statement could equally well be written in 2024. As I will discuss below, even though times have changed, in more recent decades we have had governments that are overtly resisting the environment and environmental education even as a political priority, and the public often seems to be more engaged with these issues than the politicians.

Disengaging with environmental education

As already noted, the Australian Government education area disengaged from any involvement in environmental education around 1989, apart from the Australian Curriculum. Even in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) (DESD) responsibility for coordination and implementation of activities fell to the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, who also managed other environmental education activities at the national level (Gough, 2011), rather than the education ministry. There were a number of relevant activities at the beginning of the Decade, including activities that had their origins in the first national action plan for environmental education (Environment Australia, 2000), such as the release of a national action plan for environmental education in schools (DEH, 2005), but there were few specifically focused on implementing the Decade in Australia (Gough, 2011; Tilbury, 2006).

However, even the environment ministry ceased its involvement in environmental education activities halfway through the Decade. In early 2010, the Rudd Labor Australian Government withdrew its support for, and involvement in, the implementation of the first and second national environmental/sustainability education action plans (Environment Australia, 2000; DEWHA, 2009; Larri & Colliver, 2020). This meant that the National Environmental Education Council (renamed National Council on Education for Sustainability in 2009) and the National Environmental Education Network (renamed National Education for Sustainability Network in 2009) were disbanded and the over-arching national coordination role that both bodies performed disappeared, and have not been reconstituted. National funding for the AuSSI was discontinued, and states and territories were left to develop their own strategies for supporting school-based initiatives. In addition, funding for environmental educational research, including the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) at Macquarie University, ended. The funding that flowed to ARIES ($2.3 million over 2003–2005) included projects related to

> practical approaches to engaging business and industry in sustainability, the incorporation of sustainability into the courses of Australian business schools, international experience in whole school environmental education, and an overall review of the contribution of environmental education to sustainability in Australia (Campbell, 2004, p. 1)

Although such an investment in environmental education was welcome, it did not necessarily benefit many beyond Macquarie University or leave a long-lasting impact once the funding ended.

Of all the actions in the national environmental education strategies, the survivors are the variations on sustainable schools still to be found in some states and territories (Larri & Colliver, 2020) and the embedding of sustainability as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum. However, as noted previously, the inclusion of sustainability here has been under scrutiny twice, specifically under Liberal Australian Governments (Abbott then Morrison).

Australian curriculum

In 2014, the then Minister for Education commissioned a review of the Australian Curriculum which included looking at reducing the perceived overcrowding of the curriculum and which recommended: "ACARA reconceptualise the cross-curriculum priorities and instead embed teaching and learning about . . . sustainability explicitly, and only where educationally relevant, in the mandatory content of the curriculum" (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, Recommendation 17, p. 247). Fortunately, this recommendation was not implemented. However, a second review of the Australian Curriculum was undertaken by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2020-21 at the request of the national Education Council. Included in its terms of reference was to "rationalise and improve content elaborations, ensuring they are fit for

purpose and they suggest to teachers the most authentic ways to treat general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities when teaching the learning area content" (ACARA, 2020, p. 2). Specifically,

> The review will look to:
>
> a. revisit and improve if necessary, the organising frameworks for the cross curriculum priorities with reference to current research
>
> b. declutter the content of the Australian Curriculum by improving the relationship of the cross curriculum priorities to learning area content, removing any repetition of content between the cross curriculum priorities and the learning areas and replacing the current 'icon tagging' for cross curriculum priorities on the Australian Curriculum website with a more user-orientated approach. (ACARA, 2020, p. 5)

The Review panel released a consultation paper in April 2021 which stated,

> revisions to the sustainability cross-curriculum priority reflect evolving understanding of the concepts that underpin sustainability and the features of effective sustainability education. In particular, the revisions position the priority with reference to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (ACARA, 2021a, p. 2).

In particular, the Review panel claimed that these revisions:

- Broaden actions for sustainability to include the mitigation of human impacts and restoration of environments, in addition to preservation.
- Provide clearer support to explore how individuals and communities can take action and effect positive change.
- Ensure that organising ideas fit naturally within learning areas and can be applied to content descriptions and elaborations (ACARA, 2021a, p. 2).

While the reduction in emphasis on sustainability and the environment (including issues such as climate change) is consistent with the approach taken in *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), the link to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is puzzling, except as an example of greenwashing, given that, as discussed below, the Australian Government is displaying token engagement with the SDGs, as well as other United Nations initiatives such as UNESCO's (2020) roadmap for education for sustainable development.
  According to the description of sustainability provided in the revised curriculum (v9.0),

> The Sustainability cross-curriculum priority explores the knowledge, skills, values and world views necessary for people to act in ways that contribute to a sustainable future. Designing solutions and actions for a sustainable future requires an understanding of the ways environmental, social and economic systems interact, and an ability to make balanced judgements based on present and future impacts. (ACARA, 2022b, paras. 4 and 5).

Despite these claims, the actual content of the learning areas does not enact this description, nor is there guidance for teachers in implementing the revised organising ideas (OIs) for sustainability (ACARA, 2022a, 2022b). Even more importantly, compared with the previous sustainability overview statement (ACARA, 2021b), the key emphasis on "protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and social just world" has been deleted. There has also been a shift from

endorsing "actions that support more sustainable patterns of living" to merely raising "student awareness about informed action" and recognition of the interdependence of environmental, social, cultural and economic systems. The earlier statement was

> Sustainability education is futures-oriented, focusing on protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through informed action. Actions that support more sustainable patterns of living require consideration of environmental, social, cultural and economic systems and their interdependence (ACARA, 2021b, para. 6).

The main focus of the sustainability cross-curriculum priority is the OIs, which were revised for v9.0 of the Australian Curriculum, but remain generally disconnected from the learning areas. The earlier version (ACARA, 2021b) valued the environment more for its own sake, whereas the revised version (ACARA, 2022a, 2022b) is much more human focused. For example, OI.1 ("The biosphere is a dynamic system providing conditions that sustain life on Earth") has been deleted from and replaced with an expanded version of the previous IO.2 ("All life forms, including human life, are connected through the earth's systems (geosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere) on which they depend for their well-being and survival") as SS1. In addition, IO.5 reworded as SW2, and IO.6 reworded as SF1 have added "business and political" to the actions for sustainability.

The focus away from the environment is also evident in the introduction of a new organising idea, design, which reinforces the government's focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and technological solutions to environmental problems (ACARA, 2022b, p. 2).

Sustainable development goals

Although a signatory to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, from the government's official reporting on progress towards the SDGs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2018; Department of Education, 2022) it is apparent that they are not being taken seriously with respect to environmental or sustainability education programmes which has significant implications for how environmental and sustainability education is being supported in the Australian Curriculum or by any research funding.

That the Government is not seriously engaging with the SDGs is reflected in this notice on the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) website (https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/international/2030-agenda):

Notification—Australia's Reporting Platform on the Sustainable Development Goals

The Australian Government's Reporting Platform for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be closed from Sunday 10 March [2024]. This is due to unsupported software.

The Australian Government remains committed to the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.

Alternative options for managing Australia's national SDGs data and reporting are currently being explored.

That the Government could allow the reporting website to lapse supports the token engagement with the SDGs. There is a new website, Sustainable Development Goals Australia (https://sdgs.org.au/), developed by the Global Compact Network Australia, with the support of the Australian Government: "to provide Australia with a live and ongoing platform to centralise and showcase action being taken across government, business, civil society and academia to advance the SDGs in the Australian context." While there are lots of projects listed on the website, several of which relate to environmental education, none seem to come from the Australian Government.

Environmental education or education for sustainability/sustainable development seems to fall between the cracks in Government actions. In their statement on transforming education, the Department of Education (2022, p. 1) claims "Australia meets the majority of targets under SDG 4 and we are committed to continuous improvement to exceed all targets." However, it is difficult to see how this can be true when there is no mention of Target 4.7 (which includes education for sustainable development), and "environment" only appears once: "Lifelong learning can support all learners to become informed and active global citizens, with the skills to respond to the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges of the future." (p. 4). It is not clear how learners can become informed about environmental challenges. The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water website (https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/international/2030-agenda) does not mention education either as its direct responsibility or as a contributor to other departments:

> We actively participate in the whole-of-government approach to the 2030 Agenda. We have direct responsibility for 6 of the goals. These are:
>
> Goal 6 – Clean water and sanitation
>
> Goal 7 – Affordable and clean energy
>
> Goal 12 – Responsible production and consumption
>
> Goal 13 – Climate action
>
> Goal 14 – Life below water
>
> Goal 15 – Life on land.
>
> We also contribute to goals led by other Australian Government departments including:
>
> Goal 2 – Zero hunger
>
> Goal 9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure
>
> Goal 11– Sustainable cities and communities
>
> Goal 17 – Partnerships for the goals.

So, it looks like there is no one nationally owning environmental/sustainability education beyond the Australian Curriculum, and its commitment is very marginal—as an elaboration or curriculum connection, rarely as reportable content (see Gough, Reid, and Stevenson (2024) for further discussion of this aspect).

In the next section I discuss how, despite the Australian Government disengaging with environmental education, both internationally and more locally environmental education is re-emerging on the agenda.

Changing times

Whereas most States and Territories had environmental education policies in the late 1980s/early 1990s, in the mid 1990s many were looking to revise their policies in the light of the advent of a

national curriculum and changes in the governing party at State level (Gough, 1997). The Department of Education in Victoria did issue a new policy statement in 1998, and a New South Wales policy has been in effect since 2001, but these were exceptions.

Education Department involvement with environmental education in the first decades of the 21st century tended to be through AuSSI (particularly up till 2010) or the Australian Curriculum, and some states shared supporting AuSSI and its successors with their environment agencies. AuSSI, rebranded in many places, continues to be offered in most states and territories (Larri & Colliver, 2020), and it is the most obvious implementation of environmental education in schools.

But times are changing at the state level. In recent years three states have produced environmental sustainability policies. While there are some similarities with the ongoing New South Wales policy (which was revised in 2020) and its emphasis on School Environment Management Plans and a whole school approach, the Queensland policy is focused on cost savings whereas the Victorian and Western Australian statements take a more holistic approach, including the school communities:

> To assist Queensland state schools by supporting projects to embed sustainability across the school facilities and curriculum, while saving resources and money for the school. (Queensland Education, 2022)

> This policy is designed to help schools that wish to take action on climate change by reducing the environmental impact of their operations and providing resources and guidance for teaching environmental sustainability, and engaging school communities. (Education Victoria, 2023)

> For us, sustainability is central to our schools, regional and central services - it is all about caring for each other and the country we live in – for the benefit of our students and our communities, and in everything we do. (Western Australia Department of Education, 2024)

Noteworthy is that the Queensland policy is only related to providing grants, whereas the Victorian policy provides policies and guidance across seven areas:

- Framework for a whole school approach
- School leadership
- Facilities and operations
- Teaching and learning
- Community partnerships
- Koorie perspectives
- Student-led action

Despite the lack of national action on climate change, and only token coverage in the Australian Curriculum (Gough et al., 2024), several states have instigated enquiries into how climate change will affect schools and proposed actions to address these impacts. For example, the New South Wales Department of Planning, Industry and Environment funded a report into improving the resilience of schools to summer heat (Pfautsch et al, 2020), the Victorian Government has an Education and Training Adaptation Action Plan (DEECA, 2022), and the Western Australian Parliament (2022) held an inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change. In addition, the South Australian Department of Education is supporting Carbon Neutral Adelaide (https://www.carbonneutraladelaide.com.au/business/department-for-education), and the Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet states that "A range of climate change and sustainability programs are currently being implemented in Tasmanian schools" (https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/archived-climatechange/what_you_

can_do/schools). In Queensland, climate action is combined with sustainable schools (https://education.qld.gov.au/initiatives-and-strategies/strategies-and-programs/sustainable-schools).

Following the Decade, UNESCO (2014, 2020) produced two Roadmaps for implementing education for sustainable development. Unlike the Decade implementation scheme which combined the environment with economic and social concerns in its overall goal[1], the current Roadmap document puts the environment up front in the first sentence after the Executive Summary: "The current climate emergency and other environmental sustainability crises are the product of human behaviour" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 5).

The importance of the environment was also foregrounded in the Berlin Declaration, from the May 2021 UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development. The Declaration re-prioritised the environment on the education agenda, particularly in the mention of relationships with nature:

> We are convinced that urgent action is needed to address the dramatic interrelated challenges the world is facing, in particular, the climate crisis, mass loss of biodiversity, pollution, pandemic diseases, extreme poverty and inequalities, violent conflicts, and other environmental, social and economic crises that endanger life on our planet. We believe that the urgency of these challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, requires a fundamental transformation that sets us on the path of sustainable development based on more just, inclusive, caring and peaceful relationships with each other and with nature. (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 1)

This Declaration prompted the proclamation, "UNESCO declares environmental education must be a core curriculum component by 2025" (UNESCO, 2021b). This is a very different positioning on the environment compared with the DESD implementation scheme (UNESCO, 2005), and perhaps it is another indicator of changing times for the positioning of the environment in education.

What is common across these changing positions of state governments and the UNESCO declarations is concern about the climate crisis. The environment has long been treated by policymakers and politicians as a political priority rather than an educational one, but at a time when the climate emergency is upon us, and Australia is a signatory not just the SDGs but also the Paris Agreement (United Nations, 2015), which included climate change education as an action area in the associated work programme, it would seem time for climate change education to become an education priority in Australia.

Thus, while the origins of environmental education as we know it were in concerns for environmental quality and environmental protection, the focus for getting environmental education implemented in the current decade is to focus on climate change education.

Rethinking stakeholders and strategies

Critical environmental politics have led community calls for climate action to be far ahead of the Australian Government's actual actions. This is not only apparent from the state government policies and actions discussed in the last section but also from the results of the 2022 federal election, and in the growth of youth empowerment and action.

The 2022 federal election saw more women elected to the Australian Parliament, the emergence of the independent "teal" politicians, elected on a platform of concern for climate action, and an

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[1]The overall goal stated "to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 6)

increase in the number of Green party politicians (Kenny, 2023). Importantly, in terms of stakeholders, the election saw women voting for labour, greens and independents rather than the Liberal party (Cameron et al, 2022). Significantly,

> Men were more likely to vote for the Coalition than women (men: 38 percent; women: 32 percent). Women were more likely than men to vote for Labor and the Greens. This represents a longer-term reversal of the gender gap in voter behaviour, since the 1990s women have shifted to the left and men to the right in their party preferences. (Cameron et al., 2022, p. 5).

This change in voter behaviour indicates that we need to re-think the strategies we adopt for environmental education, especially when you also take into consideration that young people are not becoming more conservative voters as they get older. As Jacqueline Maley (2024, p. 20) observes,

> This could be the result of economic alienation – if you can't afford a house, you are less likely to side with the conservative status quo. Like never before, young people's politics is bound with their personal identity, and they have largely more progressive views on everything from same-sex marriage to racial inequality.

This observation brings together three related issues. Firstly, that neoliberal politics and their emphasis on economics rather than environment, as evidenced by successive Australian Government's approach to environmental issues and environmental education, is possibly backfiring. Secondly, that we need to be listening more to youth and working with them in environmental education research (such as in Verlie (2021), and Roussell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023)). Working to empower and mobilise youth for taking action in communities is also consistent with the UNESCO (2020) priority action areas.

The third is young people's politics being bound up with their personal identity and the "rise of a new generation of nihilists" (Syfret, 2023, p. 23). According to WGSN (2023), The New Nihilists

> … are overwhelmed by global problems and they have lost faith in the ability of governments or institutions to fix them, so they are seeking solace by stepping back from the world. It's not that they have given up caring – they are simply finding that caring less is an effective coping mechanism. And while nihilism is typically seen as a negative sentiment (file it next to cynicism and pessimism), The New Nihilists are discovering that relinquishing responsibility can be a source of joy, giving them the freedom to live by their own rules, envision new realities, and set their own metrics of success and happiness outside of societal expectations.

Greta Thunberg (2018) invoked this sense of nihilism when she wrote "Why should any young person be made to study for a future when no one is doing enough to save that future?", but instead of giving up she created the Fridays for Future (Youth Strike for Climate) movement. She is one of a group of Gen Z—"the outsiders, the independent thinkers, the rule-breakers and the navel-gazers" (WGSN, 2023)—who have not given up hope, and so they offer the possibility of change. If they are envisioning new realities, reimagining a different world, where they can be happy then it might be one where people are living in better harmony with the environment. We need to be encouraging more like Thunberg. As Wendy Syfret (2021) explains, "Nihilism is sometimes described as a destructive force. But I like to think of it as a tool: one that helps me dismantle and challenge the way the world has been presented." Youth action for climate change returns us to the action orientation of environmental education (UNESCO, 1980), something that has mostly been lost over the years.

Conclusion

A major difference between how the environment was perceived politically fifty years ago and now is encapsulated in a question from Greta Thunberg (2018): "What is the point of learning facts when the most important facts given by the finest scientists are ignored by our politicians?". In the 1970s politicians listened to the scientists and acted for the environment through legislation, and environmental education followed. As is obvious from the Australian (and other national) government's responses to the climate crisis, they are no longer listening to scientists. But as environmental educators we can ensure that through our research and teaching practices the scientists' facts are not ignored. We can work with the already active stakeholders (women and youth), listening to their voices, providing opportunities for their empowerment with an aim of increasing their numbers . . . and continuing to play politics. The environment is both a political and an educational priority, and the current status is critical.

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