



Neus (Snowy) Evans

More than a sign on the fence?

Teacher learning and the Reef Guardian Schools
Program in Far North Queensland

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study



This sign is familiar. I drive past it every day on my way home. There are approximately 200 of these signs hanging on school fences around Queensland. When a school signs up to become a “Reef Guardian School” they receive a Reef Guardian sign to display on their fence. *But what is a Reef Guardian School?*

This Bachelor of Education Honours thesis traces the intersections between three Reef Guardian Schools, the Reef Guardian Schools Program and ten teachers in Far North Queensland to ask whether the program is “more than a sign on the fence”. The Reef Guardian Schools Program is a sustainability education program enacted by and in “Reef Guardian Schools”. I investigate one aspect of the program, that is whether it is enabling teacher sustainability learning.

Our vision is a world in which there are many opportunities to learn about sustainable development. A world where a skilled population makes informed decisions in their home, community and working lives and in their leisure activities. A world where people understand and take responsibility for the impact they have on the quality of life of other people, locally and globally

(Sustainable Development Education Panel, 1999, cited in Tilbury & Cooke, 2005, p.1).

1.1 The Research Problem

Over the last couple of decades Education for Sustainability and teacher learning have become prominent issues in international and national educational agendas. While much has been published on both issues, the intersection of teacher learning within environmental education for sustainability remains relatively unchanged.

On Education for Sustainability:

A review of programs around the world reveals a lack of research and evaluations reflecting upon the achievements, lessons learnt and critical success factors of whole-school sustainability programs. This process would enable programs to capture both quantitative and qualitative data in order to reflect upon progress, learn from experience and ways to improve (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004, p.32).

Much of the literature on Education for Sustainability is preoccupied with providing conceptual definitions and theories of best practice for Education for Sustainability, while evaluation of these practices has largely gone amiss (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004). The Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) (2004) report *Whole-school approaches to sustainability* states there is a need for focused research that evaluates the uptake, effect and impacts of sustainability education programs for teachers, as well as students and communities. Lang (2003) argues there is a need to “support environmental educators to research and share their learning and findings with schools communities, other organisations and key stakeholders” (p.7).

Education systems have been slow to incorporate Education for Sustainability into the curriculum. When Education for Sustainability is present in the schools it is often due to the dedication of a few committed teachers (Cutter, 2002; Robottom, Malone & Walker, 2000; Tilbury, Coleman & Garlick, 2005). McKeown (2002) and Woolcombe (2002) have identified a need to recognise current Education for Sustainability contributions made by teachers, programs and disciplines within our schools. This is reiterated in Robottom, Malone and Walker’s (2000) *Case Studies in Environmental Education Policy and Practice* which quote one of their research participants as saying: “we need to recognise the efforts of individuals...and recognise the great contribution they make” (p.156). Lang (2003) calls for

“documenting the narratives” of school Education for Sustainability experiences to “synthesise and promote the characteristics of innovative organisations and their cultures” (p.5).

And on teacher learning:

While teacher learning is strongly emphasized in the literature, surprisingly little empirical evidence exists to guide policy to promote it ... There are very few studies of its effect on classroom teaching and student learning or of the advantages of different approaches (Smylie, 1996, p.10).

Educational literature abounds with methods and features of effective professional development (see Cohen & Hill, 2000; Supovitz, 2002; Meiers & Ingvarson, 2005; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000; Education Queensland, 1998). Similar to Education for Sustainability, there is an absence of research that evaluates outcomes from professional development programs (Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis, 2003; Smylie, 1996). Two exceptions are: McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland and Zbar's (2001) *PD2000 Australia, A National Mapping of School Teacher Professional Development*, designed to inform the Commonwealth Government on trends and developments in teacher professional development. Meiers and Ingvarson's (2005) *Investigating the links between teacher professional development and student learning outcomes*, aimed at informing the Commonwealth Government on links between teacher professional development and student learning outcomes. Aside from these, as Mueller and Welch (2006) state “It is not clear how teachers learn *in* and *through* professional development experiences and if and how they apply their learning” (p.144).

My research bridges two educational research priorities to look for evidence of teacher learning through a sustainability education program - the Reef Guardian Schools Program - in Far North Queensland. Interviews, documents, archival records and observations were collected to investigate ten teachers' experiences with the program in three quite different schools. My analysis searches for evidence of teacher learning as an outcome of participation in the program. I look for evidence that suggests teacher learning can be situated in place. Specifically, I ask whether teachers are thinking and doing things differently as a result of participating in the Reef Guardian Schools Program.

1.2 The Research Question

From research on Education for Sustainability and teacher learning, to date, we can assume two facts. Firstly, there is a deluge of information on theoretical and best practise approaches to both. Secondly, more research is needed that evaluates the actual characteristics and outcomes of both concerns.

My research seeks to address these needs by asking whether teachers are:

- 1) thinking differently, and
- 2) acting differently

as a consequence of participating in the Reef Guardian Schools Program. Figure 1 supplies a visual representation of my question.

Hence, my focus is essentially *teacher learning through sustainability education* and the purpose of this education honours thesis is to identify and elucidate this using data primarily collected from interviews and supported by documents, archival records and observations on the research participant teachers.

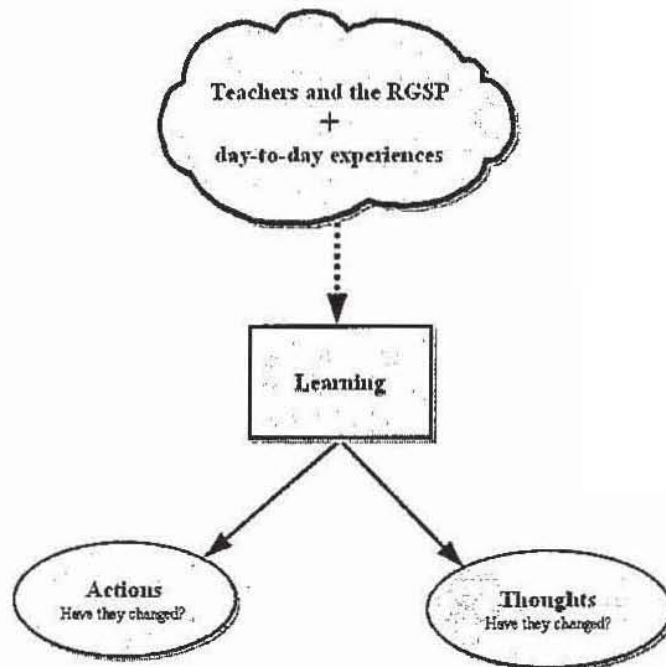


Figure 1. Visual representation of my research question