

“I am Not a Greenie, But”: Negotiating a Cultural Discourse

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Abstract A cultural discourse is not usually considered to be a barrier to the implementation of sustainability in schools. A study conducted in four different state primary schools in regional Queensland, found leading environmental educators did not wish to be identified as “greenies”. “Greenie” is a highly recognisable and well-used community discourse in regional Australia. The social appellation is shorthand for environmentalist and its use is divided almost irreconcilably between pejorative and non-pejorative attributions. To be at variance with dominant social and cultural practices and disorder an established status quo in order to transform schooling, teachers and principals must also indicate they know how to get the ordering right. This is why study participants maintain they are not “greenies” while they implement state recognised sustainability initiatives at school. This paper considers the pejorative aspect of a cultural discourse as a possible barrier to the wider uptake of sustainability in schools in regional Australia.

Introduction

A decade ago, Whitehouse (2001) published an article in this journal titled “not Greenies” at school’ exploring the discourses of environmental activism in two regional Australian schools. The small study investigated how colloquial use of the term “greenie” acted to delegitimise the work of environmentalism at school in the late 1990s. The three women in the study, Andrea, a principal, and Tara and Anne, both fifteen-year-old students, countered the discourse of marginalisation by continually asserting they were “not greenies” even as they introduced what we now term as environmentally sustainable initiatives into their respective schools. The women acted from a principled sense of doing the right thing in the absence of policy directives to substantially support their actions. In the subsequent ten years, there have been many changes with respect to formally legitimising environmentalism at school through a proliferation of state-supported policy frameworks. The driving forces for moving environmentalism from the margins to the centre of school practice (see Gough 1997) are economic and political, as the need for environmental attentiveness in all (human) arrangements is making itself exceedingly clear.

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Concerns about peak oil, rising energy prices, water quality, water availability, climate change, biodiversity loss and other aspects of natural resources management (NRM) policy are now appearing in Commonwealth documents and in state education policies and regulations. And alongside NRM concerns sit socio-cultural questions of ethics, morals and values within all levels of geographic scale (see Crist & Rinker, 2010) and Garvey (2008) for descriptions and discussions of socio-environmental ethics). Almost one fifth (about 19%) of the Australia population attends (or is expected to attend) primary or secondary school every day (ABS data), so the importance of schools to socio-environmental change cannot be overestimated.

Transformations in Primary School Practice

There are many policy calls for the transformation of school practice. The *National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* directly states that:

Schools will be important in preparing and empowering students to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. Such a vision for school education is transformative. It is more than a curriculum issue and requires a whole school approach and innovative teaching and learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, p. 3).

The updated National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability titled *Living Sustainably* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) states that a “transformative approach to education is needed, involving whole-of-institution engagement, innovative teaching and learning, and changes to curricula” (p. 21). This plan covers all formal education sectors and provides explicit policy support for “achieving a culture of sustainability in which teaching and learning for sustainability are reinforced by continuous improvement in the sustainability of campus management” (p. 5).

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts through the *Earth Smart Environmental Sustainability Strategic Plan 2008-2012* “clearly outlines the department’s goals for improved environmental sustainability... [to] contribute to a whole-of-government approach to protecting our lifestyle and environment” (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 2). Queensland state schools are required to meet targets for reduced water consumption and reduced carbon emissions through energy efficiency and travel smart programs. Schools are now required to implement School Environmental Management Plans (the Queensland state SEMP website went live in 2010). And through a range of actions, increase biodiversity in school grounds and foster “student engagement in their environment through the rehabilitation of habitats, planting and nurturing gardens and connection to their [sic] corridors and catchments” (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 10). The aim of such actions is to “secure our unique biodiversity and enable Queenslanders to continue to enjoy their natural environment” (ibid).

Transformation is not an easy task. The difference between policy intention and social practice in free and complex societies usually turns out to be much wider than first anticipated. Between state-supported policy frameworks and actual school practice is a rather large and interesting gap that proves a most fruitful site for research inquiry (Barrett, 2007; Stevenson, 1987, 2007). The Australian research literature on barriers and enablers to socio-environmental transformation in primary schools includes wide-ranging work by Clark and Harrison (1997); Cutter and Smith (2001); Cutter-Mackenzie and Smith (2003); Cutter-Mackenzie (2007); Evans (2006, 2010); Kennelly, Taylor, and Jenkins (2008); Lewis, Baudains, and Mansfield (2009); Walker (1995) and Whitehouse (2001). Research consistently reveals change within a primary school relies on the dedication of one or two leading teachers. In this paper we revisit the

problematic of "greenie" discourse, because our recent research with leading teachers in four primary schools showed this discourse as germane to the implementation of sustainability initiatives in formal education in regional Queensland.

The Emergence of "Greenie" Discourse in Teachers' Sustainability Work

The appellation "greenie" is a form of social ordering. It works by calling attention to and naming a person's actions and beliefs. Because employment of this discursive practice is far more prevalent in regional and rural Australia than in larger cities; and because this discourse may be uniquely Australian, we are calling "greenie" a cultural discourse. It is a social discourse, but its common and well-understood use is located firmly in place, and perhaps confined to the more distanced Australian geographies. We can show how "greenie" is a common discursive practice in regional Queensland. The term is indicative of a cultural meaning system where the expression of environmental concern has been and still is strongly considered "other to" normalised social practice. In the next section we discuss the social meanings of "greenie" before turning to the texts of teacher talk, which form the data for this paper.

This paper is based on data collected for a much larger study on socio-ecological resilience and environmental education for sustainability practices in primary schools supported by a Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTRSF) project grant. The five teachers and one principal were selected to be interviewed at length because they were leading implementation in their schools and have been recognised at state and national level for their leadership. As researchers, we wanted to more fully understand the processes and negotiations of transforming school practice in Education Queensland schools. This is why we interviewed the leading teachers in four leading schools. Our original brief was to develop qualitative indicators of school level socio-ecological resilience to environmental change in Great Barrier Reef catchment areas. The data we present in this paper *emerged* from the in-depth interviews. It was only during the analysis stage that we noted some of the discourses had changed little from Whitehouse's (2001) initial study of teachers' environmental work in tropical Queensland. Each educator interviewed was an active member of the Queensland Environmentally Sustainable Schools Initiative Alliance (QuESSI) and/or led an active Reef Guardian School program in concert with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Each educator was pursuing transformations of school practices at the time of interview (2007-2009) and can be described as "knowing experts" (see Davis & Ferreira, 2009) for a discussion of QuESSI networks). Most importantly, each educator independently (and without prompting) raised the problematic of being a positioned as a "greenie" at interview.

The Persisting Cultural Dimensions of "Greenie"

Although "greenie" is an arbitrarily assigned social construct, the ubiquity of the imaginary "greenie" in everyday discourse is a persistent cultural phenomenon. Graham (2007, p.47) explains that all categories are constitutive and "the label we use to help us make sense of something or to understand someone *governs* what we come to think about that thing or person". Environmental education researchers do not often address the constitutive characteristics of differential conceptions of greenness, and how this can affect educators' views about their social worlds. Cultural discourses can be highly localised and pejorative use of the term "greenie" may be problematic for educators in regional Queensland, where our research was conducted. As Kennelly et al. (2007, p. 56) point out, "notions of curriculum implementation are socially situated and strongly dependent on the social and cultural context in which the implementation is enacted". In order to understand sustainability work in leading QuESSI and Reef

Guardian primary schools, we found we had to pay attention to a cultural discourse that may have the effect of acting as a barrier to the wider acceptance of school transformation towards sustainable practices.

In Stables' (2001a, p. 127) words, "language permeates our lives as environmental educators". "Greenie" categorisation is not a notifiable educational category (unlike race, ethnicity or gender). Yet "greenie" is a powerfully recognised community discourse and not all parts of its discursive sweep are socially desirable. The term "green" has its origins in the Old English word "grene" relating to grass and the concept of growing. The Macquarie Dictionary (the national dictionary) defines the noun "green" as characterised by, or relating to, a concern for environmental issues. A "greenie" (noun) is defined as a conservationist, "someone who advocates or promotes conservation, especially of the natural resources of a country". The adjective "greenie" is defined in relation to a person "sympathising with moves to conserve the environment" and more prescriptively as someone who "produces whole foods organically, and lives more simply". The Macquarie Dictionary Online also advises that a scaly-breasted lorikeet (a small, brightly coloured parrot), a type of yabby (freshwater crayfish), a native frog, a type of surfing wave or a psycho-stimulant party drug can each be colloquially known as "greenies" in different Australian communities.

We refer to "greenie" as a discursive category of (human) social identity and a divisive social fiction that has persistent cultural traction in regional Queensland. As such, the social appellation is divided almost irreconcilably between pejorative and non-pejorative attributions. To explain how both these attributions work, we use examples from *The Cairns Post*, the leading newspaper in far north Queensland. In January 2010, *The Cairns Post* ran with the front page headline "Greenies Go Home". In the article, (Bateman, 2010), the Kuranda Chamber of Commerce and Tourism president, Barry Smith, is reported as saying "hypocritical tree-changers" moving to the township of Kuranda were blocking a number of proposed urban developments. Mr Smith subsequently complained to *The Cairns Post* he was misrepresented but what is important is that the editors exhibited no restraint in publishing an article on "greenies" on their front page with an expectation this headline would sell the daily edition.

Table 1 presents comments subsequently posted to *The Cairns Post* website in response to the article "Greenies Go Home". These comments provide real-life examples of both pejorative and non-pejorative (neutral or positive) attributions for the social identity of "greenie". Pejorative attributes include being "blood sucking parasites", "tree-huggers" and "blowhards" who "lord it over the locals". Non-pejorative attributes include "being concerned with maintaining the natural heritage" and "blocking greedy developers from running historical and unique environment[s]". The posts of John T and Roger D illustrate the pejorative attributions. John T claims, "The vast majority of people [in far north Queensland] have the same [anti-greenie] thinking". And Roger D confides "I am now prepared to divulge my heresy to all despite the risk of being burned at the foot of a solar-powered stake by holier-than-thou chardonnay sipping wannabe greens". These comments illustrate how "greenie" acts as a historically distorted, fictional identity that emerged through Australian settlement culture. Inherent in the pejorative is a social naming practice that is critical of how environmentally attentive people have challenged the dominant ideology of economic expansionism. In the sense that ideology, "is a set of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, consciously and unconsciously held which shapes the understandings or *misconceptions* of the social and political world" (Routledge, 2000, p. 381 *italic ours*). *The Cairns Post* confidently reports environmental stories using the shorthand "green". And "greenies" (who are never personally identified but are diffusely positioned as obstructive) are portrayed

TABLE 1: Edited online responses to "Greenies Go Home" headline and "Greenies 'loving Kuranda to death'" article written by Daniel Bateman, *The Cairns Post*. (All responses can be viewed at http://www.cairns.com.au/article/2010/01/26/89715_local-news.html)

Pejorative attributions for "greenie"	Non-pejorative attributions for "greenie"
<p>"Chase these blood-sucking parasites tree-huggers out before it gets too late. If we don't act now against these greenies then soon we will not be allowed to use cars and electricity and return to live like cavemen." Posted by John of Cairns 26 January 2010</p>	<p>"The headline Greenies Go Home [is] a message that encourages intolerance, which should run against the values of a community, based newspaper. Personally ... I am glad there are folks concerned with maintaining the natural heritage that makes this place special rather than making millions by building over ... it. I say Greenies stay Home (I mean here)." Posted by Joel of Trinity Beach 27 January 2010</p>
<p>"I believe it's time for us LOCALS to claim our Heritage back from the Greeny Southerner Blowhards. If they don't like OUR way of life they are free to leave. They left their lives behind for a reason, but it doesn't give them the right to change ours." Posted by David M of Cairns 26 January 2010</p>	<p>"Kuranda thrives BECAUSE of the Greenie attitude, not in spite of it. You read anything about Kuranda ... and our greenie alternative credentials are always mentioned." Posted by Jerry of Kuranda 26 January 2010</p>
<p>"Barry Smith is 100% on the mark. The vast majority of people have the same thinking, But who is game to speak up against these environment groups? They sell their mega dollar homes down south and then move up to Kuranda to lord it up over the locals. How about the young family in Kuranda that wants to work hard and get ahead a bit? What credentials do these enviro-activists have? Do they need a licence or degree?" Posted by John T 26 January 2010</p>	<p>"...Over 800 of the 1500 residents of Kuranda signed a petition against the [development] plan - a few greenies - I think not." Posted by Cathy R 26 January 2010</p>
<p>"I am now prepared to divulge my heresy to all despite the risk of being burned at the foot of a solar-powered stake by holier-than-thou chardonnay sipping wannabe greens. ... But that doesn't mean energy efficiency and reducing pollution and water use should not be striven for to help ensure the health of both the environment and us - it is just a question of how and how much." Posted by Roger D 27 January 2010</p>	<p>"Can't believe the bigoted comments from some people. This is Australia Day and we are supposed to be celebrating our secular and multi-cultural society." Posted by Steve of Cairns 26 January 2010</p>
	<p>"Anyone who can block these greedy developers from ruining our historical and unique environment needs a medal." Posted by duds of pd 26 January 2010</p>

with headlines such as “Greens hit out at plans for worksite” (Ryan, 2010). In this example of how the discourse is employed, property developer Mr Jim Byrnes, whose company is interested in False Cape, is quoted as saying, “We would like to ... have a conversation with the greens but they have to understand that they can *tie themselves to as many trees as they want*, it won’t get them anywhere ... they can come and talk to us in a *sensible* manner”.

These displays of public discourse reveal how readily environmental work is positioned as *insensible* and how narrowly this work is constituted. In pejorative “greenie” discourse what environmentalists do is represented solely as obstructionist practice. The offending and offended “greenie” does little more than “tie themselves” to a tree – presumably to stop a bulldozer. Direct political action has come to characterise all environmental work within this particular cultural framing. The fictional “greenie” is portrayed as an activist and a radical. A “greenie” is rarely a teacher at school and the complexity of teachers work in educating for sustainability is completely absent from popular meaning. *The Cairns Post* may use “greenie” for shock effect as much as anything, but the effortlessness with which the fictional radical is conjured is evidence this cultural discourse has persistent social traction. Our data show that sustainability educators are highly cognisant of this positioning.

According to Monbiot (posted 12/12/09), current social politics are framed as a “battle between two world views” in that “humanity is no longer split between conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and progressives... today the battle lines are drawn between expanders and restrainers; those who believe that there should be no impediments and those who believe that we must live within limits”. Australian educators are encouraged to “manage change towards sustainability” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 9). However, schools operate under great pressure from both sides of the “expander” and “restrainer” community divide. Those pressures are acutely realised in regional Australia. While teachers, principals, professional staff and students are expected to build “capacity to re-orientate the way we live and work [as] an essential element in shifting towards sustainability” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 8), the legitimacy of sustainability work at school remains under question. Education for sustainability is still perceived as socially destabilising. Educational moves towards greater attentiveness to environmental limits are resisted, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the social orderings given dominant expression in differing school sites. The tussle over legitimisation is but one of the condition educators must negotiate when implementing sustainability at school.

Deutscher (2010, p. 9) argues, the languages we speak and “the habits of mind that our culture has instilled in us from infancy shape our orientation to the world and our emotional responses to the objects we encounter and... have a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies”. Interestingly the non-pejorative meaning of “greenie” also recognises social acts against continued expansionism, but celebrates, rather than condemns, the practice. “Greenie” is attributed to people who act on the side of limits, people who take seriously the concept of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009) whether or not this attributed social identity is celebrated or derided within their community. The constitution of “greenie” is a popularised and culturally ingrained social practice in northern Australia. It may be historically temporary but remains contemporarily persistent.

No “Wild” Environmentalists at Primary School

Stables (2001b, p. 253) argues we “should take the... opportunity... to develop increased meta-awareness of dominant cultural practices in our own societies” with a view to understanding our “environmentally concerned present”. The question we asked in

analysing emergent interview data was: to what extent did the primary school educators interviewed wish to identify with the social identity of "greenie"? The answer, very simply, is that they did not wish to be identified as "greenies" at all. And, if they were attributed as being "greenies", they were not happy about it. Living and working in the Cairns region, research participants were fully aware of the pejorative identifications of "greenie". They neither wished to be labelled by others nor to label themselves. So why and how do leading environmental educators reject this social appellation?

The following is an extract of an interview conducted with a teacher in a rural state primary school who has led school change with strong support from the principal and (eventually) the majority of the parent community. This school has won major environmental awards and is considered by Education Queensland to be a leading exemplar of practice. However, this leading educator considers it necessary not to be seen as "too green" or "ultra conservationist" lest this cause concern among the local community. The school relies on the local business and parent community for logistical and financial support for their extensive biodiversity conservation and rehabilitation program in a Wet Tropics World Heritage area. In moving the interview to the subject of barriers to sustainability implementation, the matter of not being perceived as radicalised (in any respect) was immediately raised by this teacher (T1)

Interviewer: So what do you think are some of the barriers that you've come up against?

Teacher (T1): Probably one of the barriers I tread very warily against is *not being seen as too green* [that is] *being seen as an ultra conservationist*. But if you're a radical in any field, if you're radically right winged, you can alienate a lot of people as well. So you've got to maintain your connection with the community you're working and [if] they don't see you as being like them, but a little bit more over there, they're accepting of that. But if they see you as not being like them [at all], then they're going to hammer [you] for everything you do.

Interviewer: You stay pretty moderate.

Teacher (T1): Well, you know, we're not going to suddenly take a turn without sustainable practices in the western world. It's going to be gradual, as people get more freaked out about what's happening and the cost structures change because people make you start paying for your pollution. Then we will arc away from the path we're on now. And, you know, there's nothing new now that wasn't being proposed in the 1960s. All this stuff was just *labelled as bloody hippy trips* ... I want [students] to make informed decisions. If their informed decision is that they are going to throw their pet fish in the creek, generate lots of rubbish [and] burn plastic in the backyard – they've made that decision knowing what the consequences are.

Teacher T1 and his principal (P1) have worked for seven years to integrate sustainability into whole school practice. The principal explained their original motivation was developing a "corporate image for the school. We had this reputation – all the ratbags come here ... we needed something to set us apart ... we thought, if we start doing well, we'll get a good reputation, get a good image". This teacher and principal are known throughout Queensland for their successful and continuing innovation and their methodical approach to change management - which is why we asked them for an interview. And the first thing that popped up when we asked about

barriers was the confession by T1 that he takes care “not to be seen as *too green*”. He is acutely aware “sustainable practices in the western world” are labelled “bloody hippy trips”. And that the historical discourse remains extant and circulating even as whole regional scale change is afoot. This teacher “treads warily”. He is careful in order to maintain a productive connection with parents because this is a community that does reportedly perceive environmentalists as “greenie trouble makers” (Evans, 2010, p. 105). The principal (P1) indicated a similar sensitivity recalling her experience at a principals’ meeting where jokes were made at her expense.

[Other principals] think *we’re a bunch of tree huggers*. We joke about it and I know they mean it in the kindest jest. We had a presentation the other day where someone gave us a whole lot of photocopies and [a principal] said “Oh [name], you have got to go and *hug a few trees* for all of us, because look at all the photocopies”. And I just went “Oh”. So, I don’t know.

This principal has worked doggedly to implement sustainability in her primary school. Hers may be one of the few schools in Queensland to have almost achieved this desired goal. And yet the “tree hugger” comments from her peers indicate she is still working outside normative practice. The difficulty seems to be in negotiating a middle ground between two opposing constitutions of “greenie”.

In this extract from interview with a key teacher (T2) in a second state primary school, a binary between “environmental” and “anti-environment” is drawn even as the teacher explains how much he is learning.

Our first unit is on sustainability. And before that, I hadn’t really thought about it. I tend to look at things in a grey area. I’m not black or white, *I’m not environmental and I’m not anti environment*. I have a kind of middle of the road feel about me. I haven’t got passionate about it or anything. But since we have been doing this sustainability [teaching], it has opened my eyes to a few things. That’s why I like teaching [sustainability] because not only do I educate kids, I get to educate myself at the same time.

T2 teaches and learns sustainability. He does not wish to take up any “black or white position” on either side of a constituted pro or anti-environmental binary. Living on a small planet, we know this binary is a fiction. But it is a powerful fiction. T2 distinguishes himself from being a “greenie” by pointing out he is not “passionate”. Yet this teacher is learning for sustainability and the “unit” he refers to is an outstanding piece of curriculum. The key, leading teacher (T3) at the same primary school also indicates adopting a “middle of the road” stance as means for negotiating the negative connotations of what T3 calls “wild” environmentalism.

I wouldn’t say that I’m a wild environmentalist, but I think it’s important that we look after all sorts of things that we have in our environment. I am passionate about education and about educating the young today for the future. Through Holloway’s Beach Environmental Education Centre and the student leadership [our school] has now developed an environmental based action plan. At one stage, a few years back, we said we were interested in energy efficiency [and] it’s all gone on from there... We’ve worked well together to bring sustainability to the forefront.

Teachers express a genuine and considered interest in “sustainability” education as being “about educating the young today for the future”. They are “passionate about education” at the same time they stringently deny being environmentalists. Teachers expressed a professional desire to teach children for the future and consistently reject

both the pejorative and non-pejorative attributions of "greenie". Data consistently show across all four schools teachers actively resist the appellation. T4 works at a third state primary school:

I'm certainly not a greenie, although I'm certainly interested in environmental issues. But I don't go and plant trees on weekends or anything. I don't have a passion for it like some of my friends who are passionate but I do have an interest. I think my main passion would be for teaching in a real life sense, how we see things, that connectedness with the real world is so important. I try and basically deal with real life experience so to be [sustainable] makes sense.

To effectively disrupt an established social ordering process and to be at variance with historically prescribed practices within schools – which are what environmental and (now) sustainability educators are expected to be – one must also know how to perform within those well-established social orderings. To be at variance with dominant social and cultural practices and effectively disorder a well-established status quo, teachers and principals must also indicate they know *how to get the ordering right*. This is why they continue to explain why they are "not greenies" at school *and* that they are going to effect change by introducing sustainability initiatives to school practice. These leading teachers are *not* "greenies". They rationalise that what can be seen as environmentalism at school is, in fact, "about educating the young today for the future" (T3) and is pedagogically desirable, connected "teaching in a real life sense" (T4).

Davies (1993, p. 9) spelled out the phenomenon of these kinds of discursive negotiations in this way, stating:

Effective claims to identify require knowledge of how to get it right. At the same time, getting it right does not mean behaving exactly as everyone else behaves but ... practicing the culture in an individually identifiable way. This means knowing which cultural practices can be varied. Radical or even disruptive variations are generally only accepted [and acceptable] ... if ones capacity to know *what ought to be* is not likely to be called into question.

Each participant (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 and P1) is a well-established professional and each volunteered to lead sustainability in their respective schools. They are capable educators who enact the well established routines of school life even as they act to transform school practice. It is therefore rational and comprehensible they negotiate away from the attribution of being a "greenie" at school even as they act to transform their respective primary schools.

Education for sustainability is a form of environmentalism that is "recognised internationally as fundamentally important to addressing the critical global challenges we all face ... [B]y building people's capacity to innovate and implement solutions, education for sustainability is essential to re-orienting the way we live and work and to Australia becoming a sustainable society" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 3). Education as transformational practice is disordering long established social relationships and long embedded habits of resource use and resource waste. We found it intriguing that while all teachers embraced environmental practice in terms of habitat restoration, energy reduction, waste management, water conservation and enhancing local water quality, they avoided the term environmentalism with almost the same vigour they avoided the term "greenie". T5, who works in the fourth school, was the only teacher who explicitly used the term "environmentalism" in interview. She did so when telling the following story of the transformation of student "squishers" to frog club members.

Senior girls – year six and seven – have been part of our conservation initiatives over four years. They saw kids were being cruel to tadpoles in puddles in the school ground. They set up a club to bring kids in and educate them about frogs so that they wouldn't be cruel to tadpoles. As one of the girls explained, "Lots of our members were former squishers and now they're members of the Frog Club". I thought it was incredible students realised the strength of education to encourage care for the environment. It blew me away ...Environmentalism doesn't work in a superficial way. You've actually got to dig deep. And you do have to make waves. You are expecting behavioural change.

Discursive Negotiations as an Aspect of Sustainability Practice

Any common understanding of what a "greenie" is or meant to be is not universal and not permanent. Social labelling practices are fluid, and it may be that the negative connotations of "greenie" may come to mean much less as this century progresses. Perhaps the pejorative label is but one example of a discursive kicking against the imposition of limits. "Greenie" is not an essentialised discourse, nor is it essentialising. Unlike the sedimented categories of race and gender, students and educators are never formally required to indicate to which category of greenness they belong. And though not a categorical imperative, our research shows that this discourse has considerable buoyancy within popular culture in tropical Queensland. "Greenie" is a convenient fiction used to generate media sales and public reaction. And this may be why there is still something socially repellent about being a "greenie" at school. Interview data show leading teachers feel impelled to negotiate its pejorative attributions and avoid the reification of this reductionist appellation. This probably indicates the power of local media in sustaining cultural discourses. Nonetheless, teachers read the paper, and feel it necessary to negotiate not being a "greenie" at school, even after a suite of Australian and Queensland plans, frameworks and policies have come into place to support sustainability as professional praxis.

A cultural discourse is not usually considered to be a barrier to implementation to sustainability. The socially negative connotations of "greenie" may not even be significant to educators in other regions of Queensland and in other states in Australia. We can only write with confidence about our findings that teachers leading environmental and social change in far northern Queensland primary schools did not wish to be characterised nor characterise themselves as "greenies". As noted earlier, the radicalised "greenie" construct is very narrow, whether a joke is made of greenie "tree huggers" or "greenie" imagery is used for serious political and economic purposes. "Greenie" does not make visible any of the extended and complex work involved in innovating sustainability in primary schools. The other aspect is that while sustainability work is described in the literature as being "environmental" as well as social, with one exception, educators did not describe their own practices *as* environmental. Given the persistent cultural association of "environmental" with "radical", this stance is entirely understandable. Regional Queensland communities are stubbornly socially conservative as well as being complex, diverse and highly vulnerable to environmental change. Wider implementation of sustainability in regional primary schools may be more accepted as communities come to more fully understand their vulnerabilities. The policy settings are highly enabling, but the actual implementation of sustainability clearly involves nimble acts of discursive negotiation.

This study was only conducted with leading teachers. We did not interview teachers who may be in the next tranche of transformative change. We did consider how the pejorative and non-pejorative aspects of "greenie" discourse would play out with the less

convinced and whether it would be possible to research the extent to which "greenie" discourse/s might dissuade non-leading teachers from embracing environmentalism at school. We are not certain at this point how such research could, or should, be conducted. From our perspective, the plan "to equip all Australians with the knowledge and skills required to live sustainably" (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 4) may require an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary transformation of practice. Parents and the local communities have to move with teachers and students in schools for change to be sustainable over time. Changing school practice also appears to involve a form of cultural brokerage in the form of discursive negotiations. We can ascertain that a fictional "greenie" does not (yet) carry the meaning of "a friendly teacher". Things may change in another ten years. But in 2010, we can show the radical shoots of growing greenness are still cautiously skirted by leading educators in order to effect desirable change.

Keywords: primary school; teachers; greenie; discourse; sustainability; implementation; regional Queensland.

Endnote

In interview data, italics were inserted by the authors for emphasis.

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