



THESIS SYNOPSIS

Investigating the Impact of School Level Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) on Student Long-term Environmental Sustainability Attitudes and Behaviour in International School Alumni

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Thesis synopsis

Environmental Psychology studies humanity's relationship with the natural environment, using behavioural models to illustrate the relationship between pro-environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). In order for young people to act in a pro-environmental way they need to move from knowing to action, and develop both sustainability consciousness, or “the experience or awareness of sustainability phenomena” (Gericke, Boeve-de Pauw, Berglund & Olsson 2019, p.39), and action competence: the ability to make informed decisions about a complex issue (Olsson, Gericke, Sass & Boeve-de Paw 2020). Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) helps young people to observe the complexity of environmental issues and develop the knowledge, ability and willingness to act.

Research with adult activists indicates that time spent in nature, family and education all contribute to passionate action (Chawla, 1998), though little research has explored the motivations of child activists. Similarly, whilst much research measures how ESE impacts attitudes and behaviours in the short-term (Gericke et al., 2019; Olsson et al., 2020; Percy-Smith & Burns, 2013) there is a dearth of literature investigating long-term impact of ESE on pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours post-formal education (Findler et al., 2018). Research of this kind is complex given the myriad of life influences, difficulty in measuring ripple-effect impacts and the issue of defining “impact”. Despite these challenges, this dissertation sought to investigate the impact of school level ESE on long-term pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours of alumni of a British-style International School in Vietnam. Further aims included understanding what makes effective ESE, motivators and barriers to action affecting young people's ability to engage in pro-environmental action and suggest areas for future research.

Using Chawla's (1998) Life Story interview technique, alumni who had been involved in pro-environmental actions whilst at the research school were interviewed to gain understanding of key experiences that contributed to their pro-environmental attitudes. The findings were supported by a questionnaire measuring retrospective and current pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours by

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adapting the Sustainability Consciousness Questionnaire (SPQ-S, Gericke et al., 2019) and the Self-Perceived Action Competence for Sustainability Questionnaire (SPACS-Q; Olsson et al., 2020).

Vignettes from the interviews captured individual experiences in relation to the natural world, their motivators and barriers. All interviewees recognised education as influential, providing “options to engage, like actually take action’ (I2)” (p. 67). Opportunities included developing knowledge through lessons and events and engaging in projects that built action competence. All interviewees cited experiences in the natural world and seeing the impact of negative action first-hand as motivators, with family and peers having varying degrees of influence, both positive and negative. Personality factors such as personal curiosity and seeking out opportunities were also identified. The questionnaires supported these themes, with ESE strongly influencing environmental awareness (80.7% agreement) and skills to act in a pro-environmental way in the future (70.9%). Barriers to current action included the attitudes of others, lack of agency or knowledge of how to act pro-environmentally, time and resources, feelings of disillusionment from not being able to enact change at an organisational level and lifestyle factors, particularly the transition to university. Many were unsure of how to seek opportunities once they transitioned to university as obvious occasions to take action diminish post-school.

Impactful ESE motivates pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours by providing opportunities to act at a local level through student-led projects and events, and experiences within the natural world and the community. Though highly complex due to the interacting motivators and barriers identified, this develops confidence to act: young people see their impact first hand, generating a greater emotional response and environmental sensitivity (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). Further research exploring attitudes and behaviours in school alumni is needed to understand how educational institutions can support young activists to transition to university and continue to act.

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Author Biography

Lauren Binnington is an educator with almost 20 years' experience in British-style national and international schools as a psychology teacher and a whole school executive leader (early years to year 13). She is fascinated by how behavioural models can be used to explain environmental action decisions in a similar way to explaining our health-related decisions. Through her pastoral, academic and co-curricular leadership roles she has developed a passion for student leadership and providing opportunities for competency development through the whole curriculum. Her Master's Dissertation received the Austwick Prize for the best MA Education dissertation with a focus on learning and teaching in 2022. Lauren is currently Director of Learning at St Christopher's School, Bahrain. Email: lauren.binnington@gmail.com

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