

Rock Hopping, Yoga and Student Empowerment: A Case Study of a Sustainable School

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Abstract Despite increasing recognition that whole-school approaches to sustainability have an important contribution to make in moving society towards a more sustainable existence, progress in this area remains slow. By examining the practices of the Ananda Marga River School, a small independent school in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland of Queensland, this paper aims to provide ideas and encouragement for teachers and school managers who wish to maximise the influence that schools can have on creating a more sustainable future. The following case study highlights the School's success at implementing practices that focus not only on resource management and greening the school grounds, but also on areas such as governance, partnerships, pedagogical approaches and curriculum development.

Introduction

A considerable body of research (e.g. Fien, 1998; Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Sterling, 1996; Tilbury & Cooke, 2005; Tilbury & Ross, 2006; UNESCO, 2002) exists on the subject of education for sustainability. Also referred to as “education for sustainable development” (e.g. Tilbury, 2004; UNESCO, 2002; UNESCO, 2006) and “learning for sustainability” (e.g. Tilbury & Cooke, 2005), this approach to environmental education reflects a shift in thinking about the nature and goals of education within all sectors of society. It moves beyond the dissemination of knowledge and understanding about the environment, to equipping individuals with the skills and motivation needed to work towards a more sustainable world (Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Tilbury, 2005; Tilbury & Cooke, 2005).

Increasingly, it is being recognised that such a shift in practice within the school educational sector requires the adoption of whole-school approaches to sustainability (Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2006; Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Henderson & Tilbury, 2004; Tilbury, Coleman & Garlick, 2005; UNESCO, 2005). Also referred to as “sustainable schools” (e.g. Henderson & Tilbury, 2004) and, internationally, as “eco-schools” or “green schools” (e.g. Breiting, Mayer & Mogensen, 2005), a whole-school approach to sustainability requires the involvement of the entire school community in delivering education for sustainability. Recognising that a school is a “learning community”, this implementation of education for sustainability incorporates all elements of school life: school governance; resource management; school grounds and physical surrounds; networks and partnerships; curriculum; and

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teaching and learning practices (Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Henderson & Tilbury, 2004; Tilbury, Coleman & Garlick, 2005).

While whole-school sustainability approaches are beginning to emerge, progress in this area remains slow (Tilbury, 2004; Tilbury, Coleman & Garlick, 2005). This paper seeks to improve this situation by highlighting the “sustainability” practices of a small, independent school in Queensland. Through documenting the experiences of the Ananda Marga River School, this paper aims to provide ideas and encouragement for teachers and school managers who wish to make an important contribution to moving society towards a more sustainable existence. This paper has been prompted by my perception, as an educator, that the School is successfully implementing a whole-school approach to sustainability. The following case study is based largely on a review of Ananda Marga River School documents, including curriculum materials, newsletters, parent handbooks, and the school prospectus. Personal observations and staff correspondence also informed this case study.

The Ananda Marga River School: A Whole-School Approach to Sustainability

The Ananda Marga River School is a small, independent school located in Maleny, in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, Queensland. It consists of three early childhood classes (Kindy, Preschool, and Prep) and seven primary classes (Year 1 to Year 7). The School has approximately 190 children and 23 staff members, and is situated on 26 acres of Ananda Marga community land (including 15 acres of rainforest and a creek) (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a). The Ananda Marga River School is part of a worldwide network of neo-humanist schools run by the Ananda Marga movement.

The Ananda Marga River School’s educational philosophy is guided by the aims and ideals of neo-humanist education. The key objectives of this educational philosophy, as listed in the school prospectus, are summarised in Figure 1.

School Governance

In a “sustainable school”, the school’s governing body is actively involved in the organisation and operation of the school. Sustainability is positioned at the centre of school policies and practices, and decision-making is distributed across the school community (Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Henderson and Tilbury, 2004). At the Ananda Marga River School, governance is by way of a management committee that consists of the principal, deputy principal and members of the Ananda Marga community. The management committee is responsible for the day-to-day running of the School as well as long-term planning and policy making, in consultation with the staff and parents (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a).

Recognising the important role parents play in the operation of the Ananda Marga River School, parents and friends of the School are invited to attend monthly parent meetings. A parent is also elected to the volunteer position of “parent liaison” to represent parents’ interests at staff meetings. While the Ananda Marga River School does not have a formal school policy relating to sustainability, the principles and processes of sustainability education are embedded in the School’s vision statement which identifies the importance of creating a school that fosters an understanding of, and respect for, the web of life; is child-centred in its approach to teaching and learning; and recognises and encourages the development of the whole child – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a).

- To develop the full potential of each child: physically, mentally and spiritually;
- To awaken a thirst for knowledge and love of learning;
- To equip students with a responsible and independent approach to life learning;
- To facilitate personal growth in areas such as morality, integrity, self-confidence, self-discipline and co-operation;
- To develop physical well-being and mental capabilities through yoga, concentration techniques, team sports, co-operative play and games;
- To develop a sense of aesthetics and appreciation of culture through drama, dance, music and art;
- To encourage students to become active and responsible members of society;
- To promote an awareness of ecology in its broadest sense (the realisation of the inter-relatedness of all things, and to encourage respect and care for all living beings);
- To encourage a universal outlook, free from discrimination based on religion, race, creed or sex; and
- To recognise the importance of teachers and parents in setting an example.

(Ananda Marga River School, 2006a)

FIGURE 1: The Objectives of Neo-Humanist Education at the Ananda Marga River School

Resource Management

The Ananda Marga River School implements a number of “sustainability” practices to assist in the School’s management and use of resources. Each classroom has four bins - rubbish, plastic, compost and paper – to encourage appropriate waste disposal and recycling by staff and students. The School makes use of two large compost bins and a Council recycling bin, and actively recycles paper through measures such as reusing envelopes for outgoing correspondence and reusing one-sided printed paper for classroom activities and administrative tasks. Parents are advised, through the school prospectus and handbook, to minimise the use of packaging when preparing school lunches, and students are encouraged to take used packaging home in their lunch boxes. In addition to this, the School operates a tuckshop service only once a week with students and staff placing their orders in advance. The food is made by a team of parent volunteers and is packaged using recyclable materials. Additional sustainability initiatives include fitting new school buildings with rainwater tanks to use for drinking water and toilet flushing, and using only citrus-based cleaners.

The Ananda Marga River School is actively involved in the sustainable management of the grounds through activities such as planting native trees, creating edible gardens, and mulching and composting. The School, with the help of a local community-based landcare organisation and volunteers from the Green Corps, has planted over 750 native trees on the school property (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a). The School’s commitment to sustainable land use and nature conservation is further reflected through its registration with the Land for Wildlife Program, a voluntary program which encourages landholders to provide habitat for native plants and animals on their property (Greening Australia, 2006).

School Grounds and Physical Surrounds

Schools implementing a whole-school approach to sustainability view the school's grounds as important spaces. They are not only valued as outdoor spaces for students to enjoy and play in, but are recognised as areas which can provide opportunities for student learning and parent involvement (Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Henderson and Tilbury, 2004). As previously stated, the Ananda Marga River School is situated on 26 acres of land, including 15 acres of rainforest and a creek. While the school site includes a number of "constructed" environments such as classrooms, administration offices, and a multi-purpose basketball court, the school grounds are overwhelmingly "natural". Features of this "natural" environment include: a rainforest; a creek; fruit trees; vegetable gardens; landscaped gardens; and numerous grassed areas.

Intrinsic to the Ananda Marga River School's educational philosophy is the view that all things are interconnected. Thus, the physical surrounds of the school are valued as spaces that facilitate the attainment of an ecological consciousness. At the Ananda Marga River School, activities such as planting native trees and vegetables or weeding and mulching garden beds not only enhance the appearance of the school, but also provide a focal point for environmental learning. This learning, however, is not limited to the students. Events such as the School's Bridge Creek Festival provide opportunities for parents and members of the local community to participate in activities such as tree planting and creek exploring (Ananda Marga River School, 2006b).

The School is certainly fortunate to have on its doorstep two significant natural assets: 15 acres of rainforest and a creek. Bridge Creek, which runs through the school property, is a popular swimming spot for students and staff in the summer months. In addition to providing the students and staff with an opportunity to swim and cool down, the creek also provides opportunities for educational experiences and adventure play. Students are encouraged to be "rock hoppers, dam builders, rock wall constructors and environmental scientists" as they play and learn in the creek (Ananda Marga River School, 2006c, p. 11). An "excursion" organised by the School's Prep teachers involves the students going on a bushwalk, catching yabbies in the creek, sailing hand-made boats, and cooking on a campfire – all in the grounds of the School (Ananda Marga River School, 2006b).

Networks and Partnerships

Smith (2006), in his case study of the New South Wales Sustainable Schools Program, comments that implementing sustainability initiatives requires a wealth of skills and knowledge that is not necessarily found in a single school. Thus, he proposes that partnerships have the potential to "enrich the school's learning and provide fresh ideas on how to deal with sustainability issues" (Smith, 2006, p. 18). Describing itself as a "community of learning" (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a) consisting of students, teachers, administrators, parents and the Sunshine Coast Hinterland community, the Ananda Marga River School is aware of the importance of partnerships in building a strong co-operative community. These partnerships occur at the school, community and even international level.

At a school level, families of children in years 1 to 7 are required to contribute two hours of "labour" per week. Referred to as the "energy levy", families are encouraged to complete these hours in a variety of ways. Suggestions include volunteering in the classroom; participating in working bees; serving on the parent committee; helping on camps and excursions; and teaching student electives (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a).

At a community level, the Ananda Marga River School encourages partnerships with the local community through:

- (a) inviting individuals and groups into the school (e.g. visiting authors and musicians, and volunteers from local community groups);
- (b) participating in field visits and community projects outside the school (e.g. excursions to local businesses and environmental education centres, participating in the community *Walk against Want* event and knitting with residents of the local nursing home); and
- (c) hosting community awareness events (e.g. the Bridge Creek Festival).

This last example of a community partnership is worth exploring in more detail. Henderson and Tilbury (2004), in their review of whole-school sustainability programs around the world, found that while schools were successful in establishing community partnerships, they were generally limited to school visits to external sites or inviting community experts into the school. By hosting a community awareness event such as the Bridge Creek Festival, the Ananda Marga River School has achieved what Henderson and Tilbury (2004) refer to as an equal and reciprocal partnership. The Festival, which was funded by a Community Natural Resource Awareness Activity Grant (from the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines and Water), provided an opportunity for parents, school neighbours and community members to join students and staff in celebrating the “vision of a healthy waterway” (Ananda Marga River School, 2006b). Incorporating displays from local government, industry and catchment care groups, and including activities such as weaving workshops, water quality testing and tree planting (Ananda Marga River School, 2006b), the Festival provided the Ananda Marga River School with the avenue to directly influence community awareness and action. Thus, through the Bridge Creek Festival, the School was able to take on the role of a “social agent” (Uzell in Smith, 2006) and actively deal with an environmental issue.

The international reach of the Ananda Marga movement also provides opportunities for networking between schools around the world. Events such as the global Neo-humanist Education Summit, held in Sweden in 2006 and attended by staff from the Ananda Marga River School, provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences and ideas, as well as promoting intercultural understanding (Ananda Marga Gurukula, 2006).

Curriculum

A whole-school approach to sustainability requires the integration of sustainability concepts and principles into the curriculum. In the *National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools*, Gough and Sharpley (2005) propose that curriculum content should be underpinned by the following concepts: interdependence; resource management; diversity; natural environment; cultural environment; values and lifestyle choices; and social participation.

At the Ananda Marga River School, units of work address such topics as indigenous and sustainable communities, global water supply, human resource use, and human impact on the natural environment (Ananda Marga River School, 2006d). Teachers are required, as part of their curriculum planning, to consider their unit of study from a neo-humanist perspective. This perspective is translated into a statement that is included on the unit plan. The following is an example of a neo-humanist perspective statement that accompanies an upper primary unit of work:

As citizens of the world we need to recognise, honour and respect water as sacred and that which sustains life. In understanding the cyclic balance of life we must be active in our responsibility for protecting this precious commodity that connects all life. To ensure this we need to protect and preserve the basic infrastructure of natural systems. Investment in our environment is fundamental to the existence of life on this planet. It is our individual and collective obligation to create the conditions necessary to ensure the equitable access to water for the vital needs of every person, every community and every living thing (Ananda Marga River School, 2006d).

The above statement clearly reflects a strong commitment, on the part of the teacher, to prepare the students to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable society.

Sustainability content, according to Gough and Sharpley (2005), often involves concepts that are abstract and therefore may not be meaningful to students' everyday lives. At the Ananda Marga River School, teachers are able to address this concern by implementing a variety of learning experiences that are framed around school, community and global issues. Examples of this include raising money to buy hollow log nesting boxes for the School, designing school gardens, and creating a website to lobby for global protection of whales (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a). In addition to this, Year 7 students undertake a number of service projects during the course of the year including organising and participating in the *40 hour Famine*, and sponsoring a child through World Vision. Activities such as these suggest a strong commitment to an educational process that encourages students to become active and responsible members of society.

At the Ananda Marga River School, staff members are also committed to providing a curriculum that is integrated and holistic – key features of whole-school approaches to sustainability. The adoption of a “theme” or “project” approach to curriculum implementation allows for the integration of numerous areas of study. An example of this cross-curricular approach includes a Year 1 thematic unit called “Ponds” which incorporated water testing, poetry writing, painting and nature studies. Similarly, a Year 3 project to raise money to help injured wildlife, which culminated in a public performance of a play (*The Council of Animals*), included a variety of learning experiences such as costume and stage design, advertising, fundraising, budgeting, and environmental studies (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a).

UNESCO (2002), in its report on the contribution of education for sustainable development, argues that educational approaches should be concerned not only with disciplines that improve our scientific understanding, but also with those that promote values such as justice, fairness and peace. Recognising the importance of complementing meaningful academic learning with personal development and growth, the Ananda Marga River School implements a “virtues” program. Focusing on topics such as courage, teamwork and compassion, the program utilises activities like art, role-playing, journaling and discussions to develop students' moral sensitivities (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a). Other school activities such as yoga, meditation and singing spiritual songs provide opportunities for students to develop a deep understanding of themselves and the world around them.

When discussing the curriculum of the Ananda Marga River School it is important to note the emphasis the School places on the arts and environmental studies. The School's educational philosophy is underpinned by ten objectives, two of which are “to develop a sense of aesthetics and appreciation of culture through drama, dance, music and art” and “to promote an awareness of ecology in its broadest sense” (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a, p. 4). Despite its relatively small size, the School employs

an art teacher and an eco-studies teacher, on a part-time basis. Both teachers work collaboratively with classroom teachers to ensure activities complement and extend class programs. This curriculum approach, which values the combination of scientific enquiry and creative awareness, embraces the holistic outlook emphasised in education for sustainability.

Teaching and Learning Practices

In a sustainable school, teachers need to provide students with opportunities to not only participate in, but influence, share and even control, the learning process (Tilbury, Coleman & Garlick, 2005). Student empowerment is an important feature of the teaching and learning practices of the Ananda Marga River School. Utilising pedagogical approaches such as child-centred learning and participatory decision-making, teachers are able to provide students with a supportive, democratic learning environment. At the Ananda Marga River School students are regularly involved in influencing their learning through experiences such as negotiating curriculum content and processes with teachers and peers. In another example of student empowerment, an upper primary class was given the opportunity to decide how to spend money donated to the School. It is interesting to note that students unanimously voted to donate the money to an Indonesian earthquake appeal (Ananda Marga River School, 2006e) revealing a spirit of benevolence that underlies neo-humanist educational philosophy and education for sustainable development.

In schools that implement a whole-school approach to sustainability, the teacher's role is to facilitate student learning rather than instruct students (Gough & Sharpley, 2005; Smith, 2006). At the Ananda Marga River School, students are able to guide their learning through processes such as group workstations, in the early years, and by completing weekly contracts in the upper primary years (Ananda Marga River School, 2006a). Specific strategies such as inquiry learning are regularly utilised to encourage students to investigate and act on environmental and social issues that they are interested in. For example, an upper primary unit exploring the world's water supply involved students investigating water consumption and preparing a multimedia presentation outlining their views on water as well as offering solutions for its fair and equitable access (Ananda Marga River School, 2006d). By allowing students to engage in this type of self-directed learning, there is an acknowledgement, by the teacher, that there are multiple ways of knowing things, and that student knowledge is just as valid as teacher knowledge. In recognising the importance of an equitable and collaborative teacher-student relationship, students at the Ananda Marga River School are invited to be on a first name basis with teachers. This also extends to administrators, volunteers and parent helpers.

River School Reflections

The Ananda Marga River School is certainly not the perfect sustainable school. Indeed, there are a number of ways I believe the School could enhance its current practices and strengthen its contribution to education for sustainability. The School could, for example, conduct a comprehensive sustainability audit to collect detailed baseline information about such things as resource consumption, environmental initiatives, decision-making processes and purchasing practices. It could also form a sustainability committee drawn from staff, students, parents and community members to deepen the School's capacity to address sustainability issues.

It is not the intention of this paper, however, to showcase the perfect sustainable school. Instead, this paper provides a snapshot of sustainability practices and processes adopted by one school. With its distinctive neo-humanist educational philosophy and

extraordinary physical environment, the Ananda Marga River School is obviously not like most primary schools. That is not to say that many of its practices cannot be employed in most primary schools, or secondary schools for that matter. A vital ingredient in the Ananda Marga River School's success at implementing sustainability practices and processes is, in my opinion, its philosophical commitment to achieving a sustainable world. It can be observed in the way the School actively teaches values such as justice and compassion through its "virtues" program; in the way it values aesthetics and creative thinking by ensuring that areas such as art and music are considered more than just peripheral subjects; and in the way teachers challenge students to become active and responsible members of society through encouraging students to organise and participate in service-based projects.

In the case of the Ananda Marga River School, it is the aims and ideals of neo-humanist education that provide the framework for delivering education for sustainability. At the core of this philosophy is a strong belief in the importance of providing a balance between inner development and academic learning that is meaningful and useful. However, any school ethos that recognises that schools have an important role to play in the quest to create a more sustainable existence will be able to successfully support the implementation of a whole-school approach to sustainability. Importantly, I am also of the view that such an approach does not need to be complex, costly or in competition with existing educational priorities but can instead provide a framework for managing all elements of school life.

Keywords: whole-school approaches to sustainability; education for sustainability; sustainable schools; neo-humanist education; and educational philosophy.

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