'Not greenies' at school: Investigating the Discourses of Environmental Activism in Regional Australia

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A B S T R A C T

Implementing environmental activism at school can be socially risky business. This paper explores the narratives of three women who undertook award winning environmental projects in two regional Australian schools. Tara (student, age 15), Anne (student, age 15) and Andrea (principal, age 42) document the complex and courageous social negotiations they were forced to undertake in response to being negatively constituted as "a greenie" at school. Tara and Anne met resistance from their peers and family and Andrea fielded complaints from members of the local school community. This micro-qualtitative analysis shows that, despite the heartfelt rhetoric of environmental education, assuming an environmental identity at school can be problematic and difficult to enact. Environmental action is still not seen as a "cool" social practice in some adolescent peer groups. Nor is environmental action positioned as central to the "legitimate" practices of schooling in some communities. Successful projects rely on students and staff who are willing to actively, and persistently, negotiate social opposition to their achieving an ecological vision for school practice.

Introduction

Doing environmentalism in schools is constructed as both desirable and necessary towards changing school praxis in achieving ecologically sustainable futures (Orr 1992, 1994). Students, teachers and school leaders are urged to take up environmental action as integral to developing concepts of sustainability (Fien & Gough 1996, Gough 1997). However, introducing environmental activism in school settings is not without its difficulties. John Fien (2000) writes, 'reorientating the curriculum towards sustainable development involves a major process of educational reform and innovation'. This paper explores the experience of achieving an ecological vision in two regional Australian school communities as narrated by three women - two high school students and a primary school principal.

There are substantial differences between how the three women were positioned within their respective school structures. Anne and Tara were young women who acted to achieve their ecological visions as Year 10 students, and who called upon the resources of their friendship group to initiate a recycling project in their large P-12 regional school. Andrea, then in her early forties, called upon the authority of her principalship to support a project innovated by a member of staff in her small rural school. The commonalities of their struggles against the discourses of marginalisation form the subject of this paper.

The three women were interviewed individually as part of a research project on the construction of environmental meanings undertaken between 1996 and 1999. Interviews explored subjective experiences of undertaking actions personally felt to be ecologically necessary and worthwhile. The research data show environmental activism can still be constituted as alternative to the legitimated purposes of schooling and to the legitimated practices of being a person at school. It is not always easy for people to inscribe themselves in alternative ways in order to be environmentalists, particularly in regional and rural education institutions where structures and social practices of schooling continue to reflect the dominant tropes of socio-economic relations of power in our society.

In principle, environmentalism can optimistically call on the idea that 'the seeds of transformation are indeed everywhere, always' (Bordo 1997, p. 188), but the concrete consequences of personal action remain unpredictable and often difficult. Just as the radical visions of environmentalism continue to be resisted by the power structures of economic and corporate capitalism (Beder 1997), so can the possibilities for undertaking environmentalism in schools be resisted, depending on which discourses and social orderings are given powerful expression within the milieu of the school. Environmentalism requires courage on the part of individuals and groups to act against the politics of practice-as-usual to challenge dominant (if changing) relations of power, knowledge and economic capital reflected in the current social shapes of schooling.

The first part of the paper examines the experiences of Tara and Anne, then aged 15 and in Year 10, who attempted to introduce a recycling program for plastic and glass materials into a large P-12 school in a northern regional centre. Tara and Anne attended a student Landcare conference and were inspired through this experience to initiate a partial waste stream management program in their school. They had the full support of the principal and school staff. Yet their narratives reveal they encountered unpredicted resistance from their families and peers with respect to how their own environmentalism became unfavourably positioned.

The second part of the paper examines the experiences of Andrea, then aged 42, a principal of a small, primary school in a rural township. Andrea supported her staff in developing a whole-school curriculum project based around an endangered species of butterfly. While occupying a different institutional position to the two high school students, Andrea encountered similar social resistance from members of her school community for integrating ecological education and ecological remediation into her school's everyday curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to show how three different women negotiated themselves as people willing to enact the promises of environmentalism in regional education settings. In order to initiate environmental projects, they had to

undertake complex and personally difficult negotiations around being 'a greenie' at school. The twist to this tale is that Anne, Tara, Andrea and their respective schools, are all recipients of nationally recognised environmental awards. The women's achievements as activists were publicly celebrated even as their own struggles with the complexities of environmental identity proved challenging. In recognition of their dilemmas, the schools are not identified. You can assume the schools are located slightly inland from the ocean, the climate is hot, the growing season is long and the majority of rainfall arrives in summer.

Anne and Tara recycle

Problems of being green

Anne and Tara were friends who worked well together and complemented each other's strengths. Tara described Anne as 'very intelligent' and Anne described Tara as 'fearless, strong and tough'. Theirs was partnership of intelligence and strength, but they discovered that doing environmentalism in school was more complex than they first imagined. They initiated a school recycling project in response to their expressed desires, in Tara's words, 'to do a little bit for the environment', having been inspired by the student activists they met at the Landcare conference. What Tara and Anne didn't expect was they would become subject to being positioned as 'greenies'. To be named 'a greenie' was socially undesirable, definitely uncool and caused worry to one's parents. Neither young woman wished to inscribe herself in these ways. Texts of their separate interviews are juxtaposed together to show how closely they followed each other's thoughts in defining their problems on assuming an ecological identity at school.

The way people see ... greenies, they are not doing anything constructive. They are being a nuisance. They are just in the way, just trying to stop progress. [Greenies] are very selfish people, they think only of themselves and don't think of what other people are trying to do. I don't want to be seen that way. (Anne)

As soon as you step on someone's toes you are bad. You shouldn't be doing that sort of thing. A lot of leaders don't like real activists challenging them and challenging their power so [the activists] are portrayed as bad. (Tara)

There's this picture that the greenies are the bad guys, that they are not actually the good guys even though they are trying to save the planet. (Anne)

Some years ago Kermit the Frog warbled on television that, 'It isn't easy being green'. The term 'green' has many meanings including being 'full of life and vigour', and being 'unseasoned', 'not properly aged', 'not fully developed' 'inexperienced' and 'easily fooled' (The Macquarie Dictionary 1985, p. 769). In Australian colloquial use, 'being green' and being 'a greenie' are applied to people interested in environmental causes, who, as 'conservationists' are thematically defined by the Macquarie Dictionary (1985, p. 397) as being 'advocates ... [of] conservation esp. of the natural resources of a country'. The narrative technique of colour-coding social identity is not unusual. 'Red' had been an appellation for the political left in the twentieth century. 'Pink is an appellation of sexual identity and the 'pink dollar' is a profitable market to be chased. Within the environmental movement, shades of green can denote differing political stances. 'Dark' or 'deep green' is short hand for recognizing the ideas a radical, non-human centred ecology. 'Light green' indicates a more consumerist, anthropocentric approach. Taking an interest in 'brown-green' issues indicates a focus on the material economies of pollution.

'Green', as Tara and Anne became painfully aware, can carry both positive and negative meanings. They carefully negotiated the undesired terminology of 'greenie' among their peers at school in regional Australia.

We tried to get a Landcare group going [at school] which ended up being Anne and me and our friends. A lot of the guys ... just didn't show any interest whatsoever. They were all like, 'Oh God, Greenies, Greenies,' sort of thing. Well, what is a Greenie? The media presents them as being someone who chains themselves to trees and [is] a longhaired unshaven git. And you think, anyone doing a little bit for the environment could be considered a greenie. (Tara)

Because us kids were actually getting up and doing something, I am sure we were getting [called] names behind our backs. We had our friends, but I could sense that quite a few people as soon as we turned our backs would have been saying that big thing about ... we were square. Not because we were intelligent but because we were doing something different. Most people get called squares if they are intelligent and do well [at school] but we were being called that because we were environmentally friendly. (Anne)

Sharon Beder (1997) argues that a 'greenie', positioned as a radical person with illegitimate interests, is a deliberate fiction manufactured by media to support the hegemony of transnational corporate capitalism. 'Greenies' have been created as alternative to responsible, reasoned, collective actions that powerfully challenge how capital and economic and political power is organised and distributed (Cohen 1997). Thus 'greenies' are fictionalised as obstructive persons who act to impede the proper conduct of material development and progress. The label 'greenie' denoting in Anne's words 'the bad guys', is employed as a discursive tactic for divesting environmentalism of its substantive power by implying environmentalism takes place on the literal and figurative margins of society. Negative constitutions of 'greenie'- ism distort environmental action as irresponsible, power-less and fragmented, in response to the very real threat to business-as-usual that environmentalism represents. Anne and Tara in acting on their desires to express their own ecological identities, reflect understandings of the negative constitutions

of 'green' within their social milieu. Their response was to take great pains to position themselves as 'not greenies'.

> *People ask me if am I a greenie and I go, 'No, not in the sense that I chain myself to trees, no I'm not. But in the sense that I am concerned about the environment and do my little bit to help, then yes I am'. If [I say] I'm just looking for solutions that will help a little they go, 'That's okay then'. Provided you have your legs shaved and your hair short and you are not growing a beard sort of thing, you are perceived as socially acceptable and not, 'Oh, yuck, feral'.* (Tara)

> *A lot of people have this picture, which really annoys me [that] environmentalists tie themselves to trees. And every time I say, 'I want to be an environmental scientist,' it's always, 'Oh no, not another greenie'. I even get that from some of my family and I'm like, 'No, no, no. I don't want to be a greenie, I want to be an environmental scientist'. I'm not the person out there tying myself to trees. I want to be the person looking for solutions, looking for ways to compromise, not putting my life at risk because of trees. I say to my family, 'Look, I don't want to be a greenie. I just want to be an environmental scientist thinking up solutions and that'. And they're pretty accepting as soon as I say I don't want to be a greenie. They're like, 'Okay, that's fine'. But I would like to see their reaction if I did say, 'Oh yeah, I want to be a greenie'.* (Anne)

An iconographic 'greenie' may be a powerful media fiction invented to marginalise people's ecological concerns. However, 'greenie' naming is taken up by school students and attached to real people. Neither Anne nor Tara wished to be thought of as 'greenies' in their described senses of the word as meaning a 'selfish' social 'nuisance'. Understandably, they did not wish to be socially marginalised and so complexly negotiated around social constitutions of 'green'-ness at school by making the case their own environmental practices were something positive and constructive. Anne was very careful to distinguish, 'I want to be an environmentalist. I don't want to be a greenie'. The greenie/environmentalist negotiation is serious business even as Anne jokes about her parents' possible reaction if she did position herself as 'a greenie'. To more fully comprehend the trickiness of these negotiations, imagine yourself within your uncomfortable, 15-year-old, adolescent skin and read these texts again.

To not be a greenie is to position oneself as a proper person, socially accepted and authentic, distanced from cultural image of an 'unshaven git' or a 'feral' person. Yet, even to distinguish oneself as an environmentalist can have undesired social consequences. Anne reports that she and Tara were both positioned by their classmates as 'square' (ie: not cool) because they were 'environmentally friendly'. Their voluntary activism was not constituted as normative among their Year 10 peers suggesting that one reason more teenagers do not engage with environmental activism is it is still considered socially risky. According to Tara, environmentalism is 'not seen as cool'.

Gendered participation

In exploring issues of who does and who doesn't take up environmental action within a P-12 school, the young women found that students in the primary years of school (P-7) were much more enthusiastic participants in their recycling project than were students in the high school years (8-12). The primary school students won all the incentive prizes in the recycling drive despite Tara's considerable efforts to involve older students. Tara and Anne also reported the significant peer support they received in the high school came more from female students than from male students and they located the reason for this as being related to fear of social marginalisation. Their narratives reflect the large study conducted by Connell et al. (1998) that documents a gendered dimension to the willingness of adolescents to engage in environmental action. On the matter of gendered participation the young women said:

> *In terms of environmentalism I think that the females are more active. It's more females you see going out there and trying to educate people [about] what should or shouldn't be happening. And the guys [are] sitting there going, 'Oh yeah'... The males sort of don't care. It's not seen as cool. The guys are more wrapped up in themselves. They can't see that it affects them in the long run, or like the third or fourth generation down sort of thing ... Until someone brings it up and says, 'Look this is happening' and they will go, 'Oh I suppose it is'.* (Tara)

> *Boys don't really talk about environmental issues unless the girls bring them up. The guys don't take much of a look around at all ... You get this feeling that they [the boys at school] think that they know what's going on, but they don't really know what's going on. You don't hear the guys talking about it much ... They're like, 'This has nothing to do with me and why worry about it' ... That's just the impression they give us girls anyway.* (Anne)

> *I'd call the guys self-centered, not in terms of themselves personally, but in terms of the human race. They don't worry about much outside what they see everyday. They concentrate on where they are going and what they are doing, and not [on] what else can affect them. They are pretty insensitive ... They see [animals] as lower than them. They say, 'I don't care about them. I don't have to worry about them' ... Seriously, they just don't think to look around them. When you single them out they'll sort of acknowledge environmental deterioration but they don't think they can do anything. They don't realise they can do something about it. The girls see it and become outraged by it and do something. Girls have been taught to look after things, and nurture things. Whereas the guys are like, 'Just let [the girls] take care of it'. It's the way they have been brought up ... It's easier for girls to have their own opinions whereas ... the*

guys don't even recognise it as being wrong in a way. They go, 'That's what we've been taught to do, that's what we've been doing for hundreds of years, [so] why change now?'... They are very self-centered. They look where they are going on their own path. You can say, 'Did you see that nice possum?' And they go, 'Where?' They don't look physically and [they don't look] metaphorically. They'll notice a nice car ... But they won't even notice a possum. It's like: 'We are the only species that's important'. Every thing is centered about their human kind of race. (Tara)

The guys see the greenie thing and they don't want to become involved because they think, 'My God, these people are making fools of themselves'. (Tara)

Perhaps one reason why student environmentalists are positioned as 'square' is because they do care and perhaps for this reason, they are also foolish. It is also possible that the powerful cultural images of 'greenies' as marginalised practitioners act to distract from environmental work and make the possibilities for activism more difficult for adolescents to envision.

Tara's narrative of who did and did not help her and Anne recycle, draws some fascinating binaries of young women as responsible and active and young males as self centred and inactive, reversing normative associations of men and masculinity with the realm of the active. Tara constitutes the young men of her association who did not participate in her recycling project as unengaged, passive and unimaginative. They are unable to see and imagine the need for change. Which raises the question of why some adolescents can throw themselves so wholeheartedly into an environmental project while others 'cannot even put the plastic wrappers in the right container' (Tara).

The kinds of knowledge and narratives authorised within school play a substantial role in establishing and maintaining social relations (Davies 1996). Students learn how to insert themselves into the social storylines made available through school discourses. Students bring their own experiences to school, but whether these are recognised depends very much on the kinds of schooling practices they encounter. Interestingly, the resistance Anne and Tara experienced was not from school staff (who were indelibly supportive) but from their male peers. Perhaps these young men understood school authority in a different way and (maybe) did not wish to disrupt the powerful narratives of dominant social relations - which can include relations with a subaltern category of Other such as 'the environment' and 'nature'.

The young men about whom Tara constructs her narratives are removed from conditions of agency. They are not able to comprehend a reason for recycling, they are too concerned with 'their human kind of race'. Perhaps there is something in Tara's proposals in that we need to pay closer attention to the observed unwillingness of some young people to identify with the negated Other. How does this interact with

constructions of adolescent identity and what it means to take oneself up as a gendered social person? Detailed research on subjective experiences seems one method for illuminating the documented variability of voluntarily participation in environmental activities in schools.

Andrea manages being green

The young women in this study suggest that negative constitutions of green are implicated in positioning environmentalism at school as difficult social practice. They managed to resist the discourses acting against environmental agency by negotiating themselves as environmentalists who solve problems and not as negative 'greenies' at school. But it is not only school students who face these negotiations. Andrea, a respected and highly effective principal, also encountered the problematic discourse of 'greenie' in her work to change curriculum practices in her small rural school.

Andrea's school won local, state and national environmental awards and the continuing environmental project became self-funding - an important consideration for a small school. Andrea did not initiate the project in the sense that it was her idea. Her environmentalism began as a support strategy for one of her teaching staff socially marginalised as a 'greenie' when Andrea arrived as principal. Over time, Andrea found herself 'changed on the inside' from her support of an idea to save a butterfly that grew into a whole school project. She observed that 'the whole school environment' also changed in ways she didn't expect. While the experience was personally rewarding, her duties as principal also meant defending the directions the schools was taking against its critics.

The school is very small, only 100 students and is situated in a very conservative rural environment ... When a member of staff first arrived with a passion for environmental work and set about doing that in the school, it absolutely antagonised the school community and they labeled her as a greenie bitch. She has been running a vegetable garden [at the school] for six years now and as recently as last week I had a member of the community complaining to me about it. There is an element in our school community that's very committed to environmental work and there's also a group that's highly resistant to that so-called hippy green influence ... The school community is still divided to this day over the work that we are doing. Some parents actively and openly publicly support environment work in the school and others don't support it in a range of ways.

Some of [the parent] objections are simply directed at this teacher because of the way in which they have labeled her and named her ... She took the children out of class time to work in the garden. Some of the parents couldn't see the value in that and resented the loss of what they would see as legitimate learning time being taken up by the kids messing around in the school garden. This teacher did not sit down and say, 'Now

how can I stir these people up the most? Oh, I know, they hate greenies. I know, I'll go plant a garden. I'll put in rainforest trees'. Yet that is the way the parents talk about it.

The environmental project that won national acclaim is exposed in Andrea's narrative as both valued and value-less within the school community. Andrea's tactic in countering resistance to 'greenies' at school was to explain her rationale for action and, as principal, position herself as the authoritative and responsible person who supported these new curriculum directions. Andrea was forced to assess the concrete consequences of her actions and what impacts these had on the institutional practices of the school and on community response to these whole school innovations. She took pleasure in knowing how much the primary students valued their environmental work and this underpinned her determination for the project to succeed.

I've had people come to complain to me so rather than refer it on to members of staff I just deal with it in the office and deflect it as best I can. This is the reason why I don't get staff involved in the discussion because it's not good for morale. I just explain as calmly as I can the benefits and the rationale or the basis on which the decision was made and indicate that I made the decision. Ultimately, what I do is set myself up as the authority and say, 'I've made this decision'. Now at that point some of [the complainants] accept the decision and some of them don't. I can't help that. I can't account for the ways in which they think ...Most of them live on the land, so how do you account for the contradiction?

Fien (2000) comments that the talk of reorientating school curriculum towards notions of sustainability is powerful rhetoric, but we have much to learn about the processes of educational reform. Andrea powerfully shifted ecological concern from the margins to centre of her school's curriculum practice. She then had to persistently negotiate parental resistance to the innovation. Making place for environmentalism at school requires a disruption of established orderings of what is and what is not, in Andrea's words, constituted as 'legitimate' within school practices. Curriculum change was effected through the actions of an innovative teacher and a highly supportive principal, who were consistently, and I might add rather doggedly, willing to negotiate over 'being green' for a long period of time. Andrea used her institutional power to both inform and protect her school's environmental work with profound educational outcomes.

I can now see, that you can make a big difference by beginning in little ways and I think working with kids is the way to go. It takes a long time to change adult ways, so you start with the children. To them it's self-evident. I had no basic knowledge at all except a generalised view of being a responsible person in the world. Being a part of the project ... has actually

changed me on the inside. I now function differently in relation to the environment and ... the kids do too. I can see that they do. But I don't know if I could measure that. I can describe it in tangible ways. For example, they don't go around the playground killing things. They actually like to find butterflies and little crawlies and ... you can be in the middle of your lunch and they'll come into the staffroom to show you what they have found, including cane toads ... I guess that they are developing this respect for other living things. They ... will generate a conversation quite freely and they will be critical of each other in their talk. So somebody will say something and somebody else will pop up and say, 'You can't do that' or, 'If you keep doing that you will ruin the environment'. There has been a change in the way they talk.

Reordering what constituted important learning in a primary school moved ecological concern from the margins towards the centre of school life. One outcome was the children in the school were observed as thinking differently and attending to the lives of local animals and plants with greater sensitivity. Butterflies and rainforest and vegetable gardens were given their place in the school grounds and the topics of environmentalism became legitimate, if contested, curriculum practice.

The rhetoric of change may be seductive and the rationale for environmental sustainability reasonable and understandable, but the process of change relies on stubborn individuals who are willing to persistently negotiate social opposition. Environmentalism at school is possible, if never easy, proving Kermit's joke. More complexly, Anne and Tara and Andrea countered the discourses of marginalisation by asserting they were 'not greenies' at school. And went on to accomplish something wonderful in their respective school settings. ⚭

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