

## EDITORIAL

# An “Issue” of Serendipity: The Discourse of Sustainability and Environmental (In)Action

### ser·en·dip·i·ty

[ser-uh n-dip-i-tee]

### –noun

1. a propensity for making desirable discoveries by accident.
2. good fortune; chance.

*What leads someone to take environmental action? And what are the culturally ingrained practices or discourses in doing so (or not doing so)?* Serendipitously, each of the contributions in this Issue of the Australian Journal of Environmental Education (Volume 26) address these important questions which speak to the discourse and action (or inaction) of sustainability.

**Fuller** (this issue) begins his contribution with the statement – “*The search for sustainability will define this century*” (p. 7). Fuller takes the reader on a similar journey to that of his tertiary engineering and architectural students where together they attempt “*to resuscitate the concept of sustainability*” (p. 8). It is particularly heartening to read that students having undertaken such experiences state that they “*will never use these words* (ie., sustainability, environmentally friendly, green, low energy building and so on) *so carelessly in future*” (p. 15). Fuller applies pragmatic examples and materials which indeed provide valuable lessons for the field/s of environmental education in reclaiming sustainability and all its acquaintances.

Serendipitously, **Whitehouse and Evans** (this issue) follow a somewhat similar line of thought focussing on the cultural discourse of *greenie* and its hindrance to the implementation of sustainability in northern regional Queensland primary schools. They eloquently present the stories of four environmental educators (in four different state primary school schools) all revealing that they did not wish to be identified as *greenies*. *Greenie* is an unequivocally recognisable and common-use community discourse in regional Australia. This led Whitehouse and Evans to ask “*to what extent did the primary school educators interviewed wish to identify with the social identity of ‘greenie’?*” (p. 25). The simple answer was *not at all*. They rejected being labelled *greenie* by others and did not label themselves as *greenie* as a consequence of the ramifications of doing so in socially conservative communities. As such, Whitehouse and Evans carefully consider the pejorative aspect of this cultural discourse as an impediment to the broader uptake of sustainability in regional schools in Australia.

The final four papers of this issue turn focus (and conversation) to the active or possibly inactive elements of environmental education (and its research) through the guises of consumption, environmental learning (and teaching) and behaviour change.

In a discussion paper (a somewhat think piece), **Skouteris, Do, Rutherford, Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards** (this issue) tackle the intractable dilemma of childhood obesity and the implications for environmental education. They discuss the complicated

relationships between young children's environmental beliefs and consumer choices, and how those beliefs and behaviours are often in direct contradiction as demonstrated through their consumer choices. Bringing together research from a multitude of fields, they attempt to join the dots and reveal that "*media exposure (particularly commercial television viewing) may be a significant "player" in the prediction of childhood obesity*" (p. 33). They further maintain that "*the extent to which young children connect their consumer choices and the sustainability of the product / s they consume with their overall health and wellbeing has not previously been researched*" (p. 33). To these ends, they extend a call for further research on this socioecological phenomenon among young children and the influence of digital media use on a child's consumer behaviours.

**Ballantyne, Anderson and Packer** (this issue) focus on the pedagogy of environmental education in the natural environment. Drawing upon the findings from an interpretive case study, the authors of this study "*investigate the value of combining experience-based fieldwork in a mangrove and coastal environment with reflective and metacognitive activities*" (p. 47). The focus is on senior secondary students and the particular pedagogies that may enhance their environmental learning. Through this study, the authors contend that "*the most effective environmental learning experiences are likely to be those that integrate learning in the natural environment with classroom learning strategies*" (p. 47)".

**Birdsall** (this issue) asks the important question *what empowers students to act in an environmentally responsible way?* She foregrounds that such environmental action is commonly identified as a "*central goal of formal environmental education*" (p. 65). Birdsall offers a definition of environmentally responsible behaviour and identifies the role that knowledge may play in such action (or inaction for that matter). Three different lenses are utilised to investigate children's (11-12 years) knowledge and their subsequent actions developed in the participation of an environmental education programme. Birdsall revealed that the participants' actions could be termed action competence. She presents a useful three part model that may assist students and teachers in further learning about the nature of action.

Following on from Birdsall (serendipitously), **Black, Davidson and Retra** (this issue) further focus on environmental action (and energy consumption) among university students. The study specifically focuses on intervention strategies in facilitating energy saving behaviour among resident undergraduate university students. They maintain that "*one of the paradoxes of environmental psychology is that individuals' generally hold pro-preservation attitudes but often engage in environmentally unfriendly behaviours (Shipworth, 2000), often referred to as the "value-action gap" (Kempton, Boster, & Hartley, 1995)*" (p. 86). Skouteris et al. (this issue) identified a similar behaviour trend (value-action gap) among very young children. Drawing upon multiple intervention types (3), the findings provided evidence that facilitation of intrinsically motivated behaviours can result in reduced energy use and greenhouse gas emissions; thus environmental action. Together these studies (Skouteris et al., Ballantyne et al., Black et al., Birdsall) are particularly helpful in further understanding young people's participation (active / inactive) in environmental education.

The final section of this AJEE Issue presents five thought-provoking reviews of recent publications highly relevant to the field of environmental education. These publications also serendipitously speak to this *Issue* through respective foci on childhood participation, learning, pedagogy and/or environmental action/inaction. The reviews were undertaken by: **Selby** (*Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse, Orr*); **Sobel** (*Education for Sustainability in the Primary Curriculum: A Guide for Teachers, Littledyke et al.*); **Schnack** (*Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators, Sobel*); **Skamp** (*Dirty Money - A Research Report on Australian Consumer*

*Attitudes to Global Warming and Environmental Policy, Neco Holdings*); and **Bone** (*Young Children and the Environment: Early Education for Sustainability, Davis*).

As gestured in this issue, the discourse (language in particular) of environmental education presents many challenges for researchers, policy makers, curriculum writers and practitioners alike. Such challenges also present opportunities in furthering dialogue as the field/s of environmental education evolves and perhaps re-evolves. The continuing and intractable dilemma of the value-knowledge-action gap is equally challenging and very much part of the same conversation as we work to enhance participation and learning in environmental education. This *Issue of Serendipity* indeed seeks to make inroads.

*You don't reach Serendib by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings ... serendipitously* (Barth, 1991, np).

### Reference

Barth, J. (1991). *The last voyage of somebody the sailor*. New York: Mariner Books.  
Serendipity. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved January 10, 2011, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/serendipity>

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