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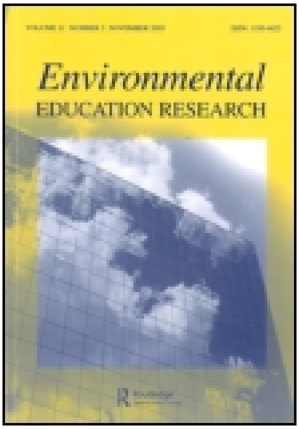

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If It Doesn't Directly Affect You, You Don't Think About It': a qualitative study of young people's environmental attitudes in two Australian cities

Sharon Connell [a] , John Fien [a] , Jenny Lee [b] , Helen Sykes [b] & David Yencken [b]

[a] Griffith University , Australia

[b] University of Melbourne , Australia

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'If It Doesn't Directly Affect You, You Don't Think About It': a qualitative study of young people's environmental attitudes in two Australian cities

SHARON CONNELL & JOHN FIEN *Griffith University, Australia*
JENNY LEE, HELEN SYKES & DAVID YENCKEN *University of Melbourne, Australia*

SUMMARY *This article presents a range of findings from a qualitative study of the environmental attitudes of young people across their final 2 years of secondary school in the two Australian cities of Melbourne and Brisbane. Focus groups comprising the same 16- to 17-year-old students in 12 schools were interviewed twice, 12 months apart. Several minor differences were found in the attitudes of students between the two cities, but these pale alongside the common, indeed, overwhelming feelings of environmental concern mixed with frustration, cynicism and action paralysis that were reported. The ambivalence towards the environment that results, together with the individualistic frameworks for explaining environmental issues that were displayed, point to areas for renewed curriculum attention in secondary schools and directions for future research.*

This study arose from the recognition that little was known of the views, feelings and actions toward the environment of young people in Australia as well as those from other Asia-Pacific countries. It was believed that this neglect could be addressed and, indeed, that the field of research on young people and the environment could be enriched, through the complementary use of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Thus, researchers in 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region have been collaborating in an international study of youth environmental attitudes based upon a shared research design. The research began with a comprehensive analysis in each country of the range of social, religious, cultural, economic, political and educational factors which impinge on young people's experiences of their environment and their attitudes towards it. These cultural background reports were used to frame the questionnaire for a

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large sample survey in each country and a set of focus group interview questions to be asked of a smaller selected sample of young people in each country. The results of these international studies will be published as a monograph by the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Centre of Educational Innovation for Development in 1999.

This article reports on one aspect of this research, namely the findings from the qualitative component of the study conducted in Australia. The aim of this part of the research was to explore how young people perceive the environment by giving them opportunities to identify their own sense of priorities and to use their own words as they talk about their concerns, feelings and ideas on the causes and possible solutions to environmental problems, and their own assessments of their ability to care for the environment.

A pilot study was conducted in 1994 with young people aged 15–17 years in Brisbane to assess the value of focus group interview methods for this purpose. The findings of this pilot study were subsequently published in *Environmental Education Research* (Hillcoat *et al.*, 1995). The pilot study affirmed the value of the focus group interview as a powerful technique for giving young people the opportunity to speak of their environmental views in contrast with the way quantitative surveys can tend to pre-define and limit the views which young people can express. The four major findings from the pilot study included:

- The young people surveyed placed most trust in information about the environment which they gained through personal experience or from people living in their own area. They tended not to trust information obtained through the media although television was their most common source of environmental information.
- Young people were knowledgeable about the environment and were aware of, and very concerned about, a range of local and global problems.
- Young people believed that the two major causes of environmental problems were people being too lazy to care and powerful institutions, such as big businesses and governments, that choose to put profits ahead of the environment.
- Young people were generally pessimistic about the future and felt powerless to do very much about environmental problems. However, they also hoped that government and industry would change and, indeed, believed that education could help empower people to 'save the environment' (p. 170).

These findings of the pilot study extended and elaborated upon previous studies of young people's environmental attitudes, knowledge and behaviour. Indeed, the pilot study identified several interesting aspects of young people's environmental attitudes that had not been considered in previous studies based upon questionnaires. Firstly, it identified the important role of personal experience as a source of environmental information for young people and their strong distrust of many other sources of information. Secondly, it established that the young people who participated in the pilot study understood environmental problems to be the result of individual lifestyle rather than structural causes; and, thirdly, that they displayed relatively low levels of confidence in their capacities to contribute to environmental change. A key concern of the present study was to explore the extent to which these pilot findings could be corroborated by 2 years of further study.

The Conduct of the Study

This study is based upon information provided by young people in 24 focus group interviews in Melbourne and Brisbane. Each group of students was interviewed twice, 12 months apart, towards the end of the penultimate and final year of the students' secondary schooling. While Melbourne and Brisbane are the second and third largest cities in Australia, they are quite different in population, culture and geography. Melbourne is a large cosmopolitan city with a population of just over 3 million people. Its inner urban areas are densely populated and culturally diverse but tend to experience poor air and water quality, traffic congestion and high levels of toxic chemical risk. On the other hand, Brisbane is a small but rapidly growing provincial-sized city with little secondary industry. Its population of just over 1 million people is ethnically less diverse than Melbourne's and predominantly lives in sprawling suburbs.

Students in the focus groups were randomly selected from six secondary schools in each city with the 12 schools, themselves, being selected randomly from the 52 schools that participated in the survey phase of the research. The sample in each city was selected to represent the types of schools (and proportions of them) found in Brisbane and Melbourne and comprised five co-educational public schools, three private girls schools, three private boys schools and one co-educational private school. These schools also reflected a representative mix of schools in the inner and suburban areas of the two cities, as well as schools whose students could be classed as 'high' and 'average' academic achievers (as indicated by the university entrance scores of their students). It should be noted also that there has been a close correlation between social class and school types attended in Australia over many years (Connell *et al.*, 1982). The highest-achieving schools are predominantly private institutions and are generally attended by students from high socio-economic status groups. While these schools tend to be located in the inner suburbs, most of their students live in, and commute to school from, affluent neighbourhoods in the middle to outer suburbs or, alternatively, are country students who reside in school dormitories. The 'average' performing schools tend to be government high schools whose students are drawn from low to middle socio-economic status groups. The exception is a very small number of elite state schools in each city which have been established to serve the best performing students from across the state system. One of these from Melbourne was included in the sample.

The questions asked in the focus group interviews were similar to those in the pilot study and are listed in Appendix 1. Only two minor changes were made. The first was to include a new introductory question, 'What are your hopes and fears about the future?' in order to ease participants into the interview and to try not to overly pre-figure environmental responses. Secondly, the Melbourne young people in the second year of interviews were also asked to identify any actions that they might like to take for the environment in the future since this was emerging as a topic of interest for participants.

The facilitators of the focus group interviews, were two young researchers (co-authors Connell and Lee) who were relatively close in age to the young people, thus maximising the level of comfort and rapport possible. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed by the facilitators in order to maximise the authenticity of the transcription. Data were analysed according to the nine major themes in the interview schedule.

The remainder of the article explores selected findings from the study and is organised to explain commonalities and differences in the views of the young people, where apparent, between the two cities and across the two years. The discussion is organised around the themes of: young people's hopes and fears about the future; their environmental concerns; the sources of their environmental information; their views about the causes of environmental problems; and the roles that they believe they, as well as other sectors of community, can play to help address issues of environmental quality and improvement.

Hopes and Fears about the Future

'What are your main hopes and fears about the future?' was an open-ended introductory question. In both years of the study, the young people answered primarily in terms of individual success, fears of personal and academic failure, and apprehension about their life chances, and their abilities to manage personal stress:

> *Year 1 interviews*
> I want a good job that is stable.
> I want to travel and get my groundings first.
> I worry about passing my exams.
> I want to get a good job and education.
> I want to get somewhere in life.
> I worry about getting a decent job.
> I want financial security.
> I'm afraid of not succeeding in what I want to do, in achieving what my dreams are.
>
> *Year 2 interviews*
> I want a decent university entrance score.
> Finding a job I like is important.
> I want to be fulfilled in whatever I do.
> Satisfaction, I don't want to get stuck in a job I hate. You see some people and they hate what they do for a living and that makes them really hate life and they usually take it out on their children.
> I fear that I won't make something of my life.
> I fear I won't get a job.

Such statements indicate that the young people were concerned primarily with personal levels of meaning—personal relationships, careers, academic success and enjoyment—and a desire to make sense of their lives and their place in the world. This finding confirms those of other qualitative studies of youth attitudes in Australia by Eckersley (1995, 1997). Only a very few students expressed concern about the future of society or the environment in this open question, and their fears centred upon concerns that the world may no longer be safe for them to live in or enable them to maintain their current lifestyles. However, such expressions of social and environmental concern were not common and tended to come from students attending the academically high-achieving schools. Thus, without the specific probing that occurred later in the interviews, the majority of the young people did not appear to be overly concerned or cynical about the future of the world or their ability to do anything about it. This contrasts with the findings of the pilot study and the conclusions of several past studies (Mackay, 1992, 1993; Eckersley, 1995, 1997).

Concerns about the Environment

Once the questions in the interview directed the young people to the environmental arena, their discussions revealed strong levels of concern about a range of environmental problems. Interestingly, while these concerns differed between Melbourne and Brisbane, they remained constant across the 2 years of the study in both cities. The most frequently cited issue across all groups in Melbourne in both years was local air and water pollution:

> *Year 1 interviews*
> I am surprised that the whole world isn't totally polluted and our quality of life down the drain. You can already see it happening to a degree.
> Our quality of life is already reduced through smog in our city.
>
> *Year 2 interviews*
> Everything about pollution. I think air pollution is the biggest problem—we're all exposed to it everyday.
> If the air pollution gets real bad and we keep cutting down trees, we'll have to walk around with gas masks and we won't be able to breathe.
> I think water pollution is a really serious problem because if we keep dumping stuff in the ocean, such as sewerage and that, all the creatures in the sea will die.

By contrast, the most commonly cited concerns in Brisbane across the 3 years covered by the pilot study and the 2 years of this study were local urban development, its encroachment on natural areas, and the directly related impacts on flora and fauna. For example, common responses in Year 1 included:

> We're getting so many more houses everyday. As well, people want to live on acreage and soon there's not going to be any bushland left.
> Houses are spreading everywhere. As the number of people living in the city grows, the number of trees lost increases and the further you have to drive as the city sprawls.

The regularity and strength of this style of comment indicated that the young people were disturbed and frustrated at the nature and rate of the suburban sprawl in Brisbane and its encroachment on bushland. This frustration was often expressed in the form of pessimism that this situation was inevitable:

> Today it's people versus animals—and people always win.
> What else can you do? People need homes!

Indeed, by the second year, this primary environmental concern among Brisbane young people was that there would be 'no environment left' as development continued:

> I am concerned that the environment is not going to be there when we have kids. They won't be able to experience what we've experienced. Trees will be all gone and it will be all developed and industrial.

The different foci of concern between students in the two cities tend to reflect the industrial nature of Melbourne in contrast to Brisbane's sprawling suburbs. Apart from the Melbourne concern with pollution and the Brisbane concern with urban sprawl, very few other local problems were identified consistently. Interestingly, some participants in Melbourne were able to reflect upon the non-recognition of broader patterns of local environmental problems in their discussions:

> Everyone hones in on one big problem, but not the little ones. No one wants to admit that we have a problem such as too many freeways.

When the young people were asked how environmental problems make them feel, they expressed three common sentiments—frustration, sadness and pessimism. Frustration was the most common with the young people saying they felt frustrated, and often angry, that 'there is so much talk and not enough practical action being taken'. They often said that despite what was being done, 'it is not enough and people are going to continue doing the same thing'. Many lamented that, as young people, they felt that they could not do anything to really change major problems:

> *Year 1 interviews*
> I feel really helpless. What can I do? I'm a 16-year-old kid in a classroom. I've got all these views, but what can I do about it?
>
> *Year 2 interviews*
> I'm annoyed that I'm not in a position of authority where I can do anything about it.
> Recycle? But you wonder if you can make a difference.

The young people also expressed feelings of sadness and pessimism at the 'reality' (not merely 'belief' in their estimate) that the condition of the environment is going to get worse rather than improve. Their pessimism about environmental problems was reflected in comments such as:

> I feel pretty sad. We should be doing something about it now. It sucks.
> No one will be able to appreciate it in the future.

Thus, in many ways the range of feelings expressed was quite negative. Indeed, not one person volunteered any positive feelings at this point in the interviews or said that environmental improvements were possible. When taken together, these comments indicate—in the young people's own words—that they are concerned about environmental problems and worried about future prospects. This is also suggested in much past research (Gayford, 1987; Hausbeck *et al.*, 1992; Pawlowski, 1996). The finding in the pilot study that students from private schools tended to express more concern about distant or global environmental concerns that they did about local ones (whereas the reverse was found in government schools) was not repeated in this study.

Sources of Environmental Information

Previous research in Australia has identified two major sources from which young people obtain their information about the environment—the media and their schools (Youth Research Centre, 1991; Yencken, 1993). This is similar to findings in other countries (e.g. Blum, 1987; Hausbeck *et al.*, 1992; NEETF, 1994; Leal Filho, 1996) and for members of the general public in Australia (Keys Young, 1994). The focus group interviews in Melbourne and Brisbane identified these sources also. However, in the focus group situation where there was no pre-determined range of responses, the young people consistently identified their own personal experiences as the major source of information about the environment. Indeed, personal experiences were cited as the most reliable source of environmental information also:

> *Year 1 interviews*
>
> My own experiences. Everyday you see pollution, for example. You can go into the natural environment, or just the suburbs, and see that it has almost 'had it'. You see housing estates in places where animals lived.
>
> It's best to see it for yourself or if you are shown it personally. Pictures can be changed or distorted and statistics altered. You don't know for sure whether it's the real thing.
>
> *Year 2 interviews*
>
> Personal experience. I know where I live used to be all bush. In the last five years it has been all chopped down. Everyone is sub-dividing their land.

The media were also seen as a major source of environmental information, especially television news, documentaries and sometimes advertisements. Newspapers were also mentioned as were magazines such as *National Geographic*. However, the media were not seen as trustworthy sources with the exception of documentaries (such as those narrated by David Attenborough). Television news programmes were especially seen to be untrustworthy. This was due to perceptions that television reporters sensationalise issues, represent only one person's opinions (generally the reporter or owner of the network), offer few opportunities for analysis, critique or discussion, and are negative in their portrayal of pro-environmental campaigners. This critical perspective on the media was reflected in both cities in both years of the study:

> *Year 1 interviews*
>
> The media misinterpret the environmental message—it really gets presented as an extreme.
>
> They should think about how they portray environmental problems and the parties involved. They try to convince people 'for' or 'against', for example, 'forests versus jobs'.
>
> There is no effort to find a compromise between parties or look at alternatives.
>
> Reporters are going to extremes and report only the news which has conflict in it.

> *Year 2 interviews*
>
> You only believe the media to an extent. You don't believe the fine details, just the overall picture.
>
> The media screw us about so much I don't think that they tell us the truth.
>
> They only tell us what they want to. They just push things that are happening at the time and it goes through a lot of trends.
>
> The media mainly raises the issues but you become a bit cynical watching about environmental issues on TV because they just sensationalise issues for ratings or to sell newspapers. It's good that somebody is raising the issues but it is usually only one-sided.

These responses are signs of sophisticated media literacy. They indicate that most of the young people were aware of media bias but were still able to acknowledge that the media were important and effective ways of disseminating environmental information.

School was also identified as an important source of environmental information. However, the young people's assessments of the value of school as a site for environmental education could be characterised as one of 'missed opportunities'. There was general praise for subjects such as geography, science, chemistry and biology. This is a significant commendation for these subjects as the focus group members were drawn from students across the full range of subject areas. However, many young people were very critical of the failure of their schools to fulfil their potential in environmental education.

Differences at this point between the young people in the two Australian cities, school types, and across the 2 years of the study are of significant interest. Most young people from all types of schools in Melbourne believed that school was an influential source of environmental information as did students from the high-achieving schools in Brisbane. These students suggested schools provide the 'basics' which they could trust and from which they could investigate further or make comparisons with things they see or hear in the media or learn through their own experiences. These young people commonly attributed this positive support for their schools to instances where they have been taught by particular teachers who possessed a strong environmental interest and ethic or because they had enjoyed studying particular subjects such as geography, biology and/or chemistry.

In contrast, the Brisbane young people from state schools (as well as from two high-achieving schools in Melbourne in Year 2 interview) expressed very strong condemnations of their high schools as sources of environmental education. This sentiment dramatically increased by Year 2 so that the majority of students in both cities appeared increasingly critical of their schools for not providing up-to-date and relevant information about the environment. Some said that high school had not provided them 'with any environmental education'. These young people were concerned it was 'not possible to learn anything about the environment at school unless you took particular subjects'. The range of strong comments on this point included:

> You can go through school and not learn anything. We're *aware* but we don't *know* anything. Unless you do biology or geography you don't really cover it. Even in biology we only have looked at the basic

> structure of plants and maybe a bit about habitat. We did something on ozone. A lot of things we did on the environment was not very memorable because they (the lessons) were so boring.
>
> It comes down to what subjects you're doing. For example, economics is having a big influence on my opinion of the environment—it's never talked about in economics so you don't think it's that important. If you do science or geography, then you're more, kind of, into environmental ideas.

Some contrasted this with their desire for practicality and relevance in their studies and with their primary school education:

> There should be more practical experiences in school. What you learn in school needs to be put in perspective of the real world.
>
> In some classes we learnt something but not much—Year 7 and 8 [pupils aged 12–13 years] mostly, or primary school. All we've done at high school is cover ozone and greenhouse really.
>
> In the younger years at school you learn about these things whereas when you get into the higher grades your subjects change. So if you are not doing geography or biology you don't learn anything about the environment.

A particularly significant point to emerge from questions about the reliability of sources of environmental information is the intellectual maturity of the young people in that they were generally very aware of the need to critically analyse what they see in the media and hear at school and to interpret this in the light of their own personal experiences and opinions. However, embedded in the primacy of personal experience as a guide to reliable environmental information is the possibility that young people's explanations of environmental problems and solutions could be simplistic and atheoretical and that they could readily become cynical about social institutions and possibilities for social change. The strength of these possibilities is revealed in the following sections.

Causes of Environmental Problems

The young people in the focus groups overwhelmingly identified 'people' as the major cause of environmental problems in both years. This important finding has not been revealed in past research based on surveys which have not enabled young people to frame their opinions about the causes of environmental problems in their own words. The young people particularly identified negative human characteristics such as laziness, lack of care, greed and ignorance, and similar attitudes in government and industry:

> *Year 1 interviews*
>
> Humans—we are the source. Pollution, is caused by shortcuts and trying to save money wherever possible by damaging the environment.
>
> Choosing money over the environment because they believe it's seen as more important for our way of life.
>
> Greed is natural—maybe we're just on a destructive path. Look at the OK-Tedi issue in PNG [where run-off from an Australian-owned

> multinational gold-mining operation destroyed local sources of fresh water and fish habitats]. The government, politicians and big business just weren't giving a stuff!

> *Year 2 interviews*
>
> Us, people just living. It's just our human nature.
>
> Ignorance and greed. Economic reasons. Everyone needs to work but it is easier for people to pollute. We need to find alternatives.

The young people suggested that most people are lazy and unwilling to take responsibility for environmental care because it might have too great an impact on their personal ease and comfort. They said that these same human characteristics also inhibited positive action for the environment and that people would only change when faced with environmental disasters.

> If it doesn't directly affect you, you don't think about it.
>
> People have an attitude of why should I help—that they can't have an effect.
>
> Everybody says we have to do something about it and we recognise that its important, but we don't do anything about it—the only thing we do is complain that it's getting worse.
>
> Time—it takes a long time—and this is what a lot of people say, time. You want to be able to get anywhere you want to go. Everyone wants convenience and a hassle-free life.

Overpopulation was another commonly identified cause of problems at both the local and global levels because of the subsequent impacts on resources through the need for more houses, more cars, more services, and so on. Only one student out of all those participating in the 24 focus group sessions identified human alienation from nature as a possible cause of environmental problems and only a few pointed to the attitudes of 'governments' and 'big business'. These participants were critical of these social institutions for caring 'more about money' and not enough about the causes of problems:

> The government wastes money on things to cover the problems up. They should be cleaning things up, not building more things. Penalties for dumping rubbish in waterways, for instance, are not high enough and the government is not interested in enforcing its regulations.

Interestingly, while government and business were not seen as primary causes of problems, both institutions were seen as locations where change could be effected, e.g. through enacting and policing regulations over the use of the environment and, in the case of business, the adoption of more efficient and less long-range view practices.

These findings suggest young people have an individualistic framework for thinking about the causes of environmental problems. Only a few seemed aware of the way social structures and institutions shape people's values and, in turn, may cause environmental problems. Instead, most seemed to think that changing individual values could redress the negative environmental impacts brought on by the political expedience of governments and the profit motives of industries. This failure to recognise the interaction of structural and individual influences on behaviour and the causes of, and solutions to, environmental problems is reminiscent of conclusions in Gilbert's research on the effects of social, economic and geographic education and which led him to summarise the resultant sense of youth powerlessness in his book title, *The Impotent Image* (Gilbert, 1982, 1984). However, despite this individualistic framework, few of the young people seemed willing to acknowledge how their own lifestyles could contribute to environmental problems. Indeed, they tended to talk in the third person at this point in all the interviews and did not discuss how, for example, they could reduce their personal consumption or use resources less wastefully.

Improving Environmental Quality

The young people displayed mixed responses to questions about ways of improving environmental quality, but consistently suggested that changing people's attitudes was the major change necessary. This is in line with their individualistic analyses of the causes of environmental problems. Similarly, just as few acknowledged personal responsibility for causing environmental problems, few of the young people mentioned how their own attitudes or lifestyles might need to change. Instead, many suggested that increased awareness and education (for others) were necessary.

While some young people thought that quite a lot is being done in Australia to deal with environmental problems, the environmental action most commonly cited was recycling at the local level. All other types of personal actions or actions by industry and governments were mentioned very infrequently. Among the governmental actions that were mentioned were environmental laws and penalties (e.g. fines), the creation of national parks, the banning of CFCs and the promotion of unleaded petrol. Public environmental events, such as 'Clean-Up Australia Day' and awareness campaigns by conservation groups, especially Greenpeace, were seen to be increasingly important.

While the young people felt that a lot more could be done to improve the environment, they frequently emphasised that it was hard for people to do more than they were currently doing (i.e. apart from recycling). Others felt that, while not enough was being done, little else could be expected until government intervention and control measures were put in place and governments actually enforced the laws already passed. As a result, it was often argued (especially in the second year of the study) that it was essential for alternative ways of living to be developed, and that government and industry have a fundamental role to play in this by setting an example in their own activities and by making environmentally friendly products and services economically viable for average working families:

> If government does it, then we'll see it and think we should be doing it too.
> The government should encourage it more—introduce more things.
> I think it takes more financial commitment from the government.
> Governments need to look at tougher environmental laws.
> It's good that we have these products that are environmentally friendly but they cost 'ten times' as much, so we can't afford them.

> Governments should make things that aren't good for the environment more expensive. How do you expect young people to take the government seriously when a litre of Coke costs more than a litre of petrol?
>
> Environmentally friendly products should be made cheaper to encourage people to use them and make people realise the long term advantage in using these products.

These perceptions of a lack of societal support for personal environmental action are reflected in the limited sense of agency or personal efficacy reported by members of almost all the focus groups. Nevertheless, they still believed that it was important for 'everyone to do something, even if it was just the little things'. Other comments in this vein included:

> *Year 1 interviews*
>
> I believe it all starts here [pointing to himself]. Even with the smallest things, you have to keep on going and going.
>
> Everyone can do something, small or big.
>
> People shy away from it, but if each person did all the little things, instead of thinking of it as too much, things would change.

> *Year 2 interviews*
>
> Yes, definitely. I think that this is where saving the environment lies, in our future, because the people of today are becoming aware but we [students] are the ones who are aware.
>
> Yes, it is all up to yourself to do the things at home and listening to other people's views.

The notion of environmental efficacy was further explored at this point in the interviews in Melbourne in the second year. Participants were asked whether there were any local actions, such as writing letters, that they might like to take now or in the future. The young people in every one of these groups indicated overwhelming cynicism about the worth of making such efforts. They stated that they would not know to whom to write, that their letters would not get read and, hence, that their actions would not make any difference:

> I'm going to keep doing the same things for the environment I'm already doing but I wouldn't go to the extent of signing a petition or writing a letter. It needs too much time and who are you going to write to? What are you going to write about? You'll feel stupid. They won't read it. They wouldn't pay attention to it anyway. It's not worth complaining to the Council.
>
> I think that a lot of people feel that even if they do take the time to write a letter or attend a meeting that it's not going to make any difference so what's the point in going to the trouble?
>
> I think taking your own action is better than making a report or a complaint.
>
> You see with making a report or a complaint, it's got to go to someone higher up. If they don't care about it, they won't do anything about it. Same with writing a letter.

A similar expression of perceived powerlessness was displayed when the young people were asked whether they believed they could influence the actions of other people. Most suggested that, while it was possible to influence other people, 'you would have to be a popular or a powerful person'. However, some also said that they did not believe that it was appropriate to tell friends about their environmental beliefs because they might think that 'you are telling them what they should do'. Others felt that it would not be 'cool':

> *Year 1 interviews*
> I don't think it's cool to tell people what to do. You don't want to shove it down people's throats; but on a personal level you might be able to say something.

> *Year 2 interviews*
> Close friends maybe; it depends how you do it. If you show people what you do instead of telling them about it, and let them decide then they are more likely to do it. It's more that you have to live your life and hopefully people around you will notice things that you are doing and realise for themselves what to do.
> If people are strongly set in their ways it's hard to convince them.

However, young people from one category of schools did have a more pro-active outlook on such matters. These were girls from the high-achieving private single-sex schools in both cities who thought that it might be possible to tell their parents or friends about ways to work for the environment. These girls also suggested that a good approach would be to show people alternatives although, pessimistically, they qualified their views by stating that most people would need to experience environmental problems first-hand before their attitudes and actions could be changed. One of these groups was particularly politically conscious and spoke of the power of consumer action:

> I think we can tell companies. We can say that we will buy different products if they do not change.

These girls also suggested that it was going to be necessary for government to take the lead and implement new policies and standards before most people will change:

> I think the government has an important role in implementing things and building up education for the environment—then, of course, people are going to be more willing to change.

These examples of political insight are encouraging and are evidence that there may be more opportunities for the development of political literacy in the secondary school curriculum than the main findings of this study might suggest. They also lead to the question of why the (randomly selected) students of this category of school were different from all others and to questions about the effects of school culture on environmental and civic conscientisation.

Trends and Issues in the Environmental Perspectives of Australian Young People

In summary, a number of similarities emerged in the young people's discussions across the 2 years of focus group interviews and the pilot study. These reveal important consistencies in how young people think, feel and act toward the environment. This series of interviews reveal that the environmental attitudes of young people in Melbourne and Brisbane are characterised by the following patterns:

- The major preoccupation of the young people in the study is concern about their own individual futures. Without specific prompting, few suggested that the future of society or the environment was a concern.
- The environmental problems that the young people are most concerned about are local pollution and urban development with the relative degree of concern for these two issues shaped by whether the young people live in Melbourne or Brisbane, respectively.
- Environmental problems are seen to arise primarily from the attitudes and behaviours of people and the tendency of governments and industry to put economic profitability ahead of environmental concerns.
- Personal experiences are the most trusted source of environmental information. With the exception of some television documentaries, the media are the least trusted source of environmental information. This is due to their perceived tendency to sensationalise or present limited, biased perspectives. Television news was seen to be particularly unreliable in this regard.
- Schools are regarded as a major source of reliable environmental information. However, most young people are not satisfied with the relative lack of environmental education in the curriculum, especially at the senior secondary level. They believe that it is not good enough for schools to confine environmental education to a few elective subjects, such as biology or geography.
- The young people believe that the major changes needed to look after the environment more effectively involve changing people's attitudes and lifestyles. They also believe that governments need to enforce environmental laws and enforce penalties for infractions, and that industry needs to take responsible environmental management more seriously than at present.
- The young people seem to suffer from a sense of 'action paralysis' in that they believe the only things that they can do for the environment are small things such as recycling. Most have had no experience in participating in public environmental actions either with their families or at school, and are unwilling to consider small activities such as letter writing, or are cynical about their effects. They also believe that, as adults in the future, they will be able to do little more than they are already doing.

This range of environmental perceptions and attitudes may be summarised in terms of the strong sense of *ambivalence* that the young people feel about these problems and their solutions (Connell, 1997). That is, they are strongly concerned about environmental problems (especially in their local community), but feel frustrated, pessimistic and even angry because not enough practical action is being taken and they see little likelihood of this changing.

Ambivalence means that these sentiments do not translate into action. Thus, ambivalence is also a characteristic of the young people's views about improving environmental quality. While the young people were quite enthusiastic about performing household activities (especially recycling) and identified individual agency as very important (because 'it needs everybody to do something'), at the same time they were pessimistic about the benefit of performing environmentally friendly behaviours in light of the inaction of other people, government and industry. Ambivalence means that the young people believe that personal change is necessary, but do not have strong personal motivation to contribute and, indeed, often stated that 'people will never change', 'that money will always win out' and 'that there is a lack of affordable alternatives'. Equally conflicting beliefs about the value of performing local civic tasks such as writing letters were also evident. The students expressed positive views of the importance of such activities, but were cynical and pessimistic about their likelihood of success. Indeed, they generally regarded such actions as futile.

Most of the young people also believed that there would be little scope for them to do things for the environment as they grew older unless they obtained specific environmental jobs or were elected into government:

> Yeah, those who get the right sort of job or go into government, they will be able to effect change. I probably won't have much more scope than I do now. I'll just do what I normally do.
>
> I'll just go about what I'm doing now.
>
> If you were a rich millionaire, or a politician or something and you wrote a letter, well, people are going to pay attention to it. But, if you are like us and you wrote a letter to Canberra, they wouldn't even read it. They probably wouldn't even recycle it!

These ambivalent feelings of concern, frustration, cynicism and action paralysis are very important given that such outlooks may colour the environmental orientations the young people carry into their adult lives and careers. Urgent attention is required at schools, in the media and in the home to illustrate that optimism is possible because many people are already working to solve environmental problems and that they, as young people and later as adults, can join them in this. Schools have a most important role to play in teaching such a curriculum for hope. A necessary first step is for young Australians to develop the capacity to envision alternative futures, to think critically about them, to plan and evaluate alternative courses of actions, and to translate their attitudes of concern into motivation, willingness and an ability to act for the environment. These are the democratic capacities that underlie critical pedagogical practice in environmental education (Fien, 1993) and which Jensen and Schnack (1997) call 'action competence'. Fien (1990) has also provided a number of case studies and activities for teaching about 'sustainable development success stories' while the contributors to the 1998 *World Education Yearbook* (Hicks & Slaughter, 1998) have outlined the components for a curriculum based upon realistic hope and optimism for the future. As Brian Roberts, one of the founders of the Landcare movement in Australia, has argued:

> A critical element of any education is the enthusiastic optimism which it generates in the learner. Given the range of seemingly intractable problems of pollution and population, realists can easily embrace a

> doom-laden philosophy with overwhelming effects on young students. The case for hope, courage, persistence and sequential progress must be made clearly but realistically. This can be done by striking a balance between idealism and realism in such a way as to use the success stories of our era to their most beneficial effect. This does not mean playing down the serious and urgent nature of environmental problems, but rather engendering an acceptance of positive change and the need for a long term perspective. (Roberts, 1989, p. 5)

Future Research Directions

The findings also suggest avenues for further research. The findings of this focus group study are currently being analysed and integrated with those of the sample survey of environmental knowledge and attitudes of over 5500 young people that was also a part of the study (Connell *et al.*, 1999, in press) and the implications of different, hut complementary, research approaches assessed (e.g. see Gerlach, 1997). Studies are also needed to identify the influences on environmental knowledge and attitudes once young people leave secondary school (e.g. see Venton, 1998). In addition, further analysis of not just the Australian data but also that obtained by researchers in the other 14 countries in the broad international study who are using similar research protocols is also currently underway.

The findings of the Australian study indicate that a major research effort is needed to explore the relationships between school experiences and other social influences on youth disempowerment. The sense of frustration and powerless displayed in these findings reflect Gilbert's findings about political impotence described earlier and lead to questions about the roles education plays in causing or, at least, not addressing youth disempowerment. Gilbert's conclusions about the negative effects of the prevailing discourses of liberal individualism in textbooks and syllabus documents in the social subjects in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s suggest one possible answer (Gilbert, 1982, 1984). His identification of the images in curriculum materials has been supported by similar research by Bennett (1993, 1996) on geography textbooks in the UK, Johnston (1992) on biology textbooks in Australia, and by Mulder (1997) in Thailand. Interestingly, Mulder's research also traces the parallels between images of the individual and society in school textbooks with those in university texts, the media and contemporary fiction. These studies provide suggestions for further research although such exercises in discourse analysis do need to be moderated by Singh's cautionary note about the differences between literal, contextual and strategic readings (Singh, 1998). However, there is a need to move beyond discourse analysis to consider how and why some schools and teachers are able to make contextual and strategic readings of their situation and curriculum materials. Similarly, there is a need for research into professional development processes which can enable teachers to identify and problematise the dominant discourses of liberal individualism in curriculum materials and other influences on social learning. Research is also urgently needed into the aspects of school culture which can address the driving forces which contribute to youth frustration and disempowerment, as is research into the pedagogical approaches which can help young to strategically (re)define themselves in relationship to such driving forces and develop insights and skills that encourage hope, enthusiasm and action competence.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of the focus group interview for constructing an in-depth picture of young people's environmental knowledge, attitudes and actions. This qualitative approach can uncover perceptions of the lived realities of young people and reflect their priorities and own ways of conceptualising the world. As suggested in the pilot study (Hillcoat *et al.*, 1995), and further evidenced in this report, the focus group interviews revealed strongly conflicting expressions of hope for social and environmental change coupled with a deep sense of pessimism, frustration and action paralysis. Such findings have not been identified in previous sample survey-based studies of youth environmental attitudes.

The majority of young people were found to be locked in the liberal idealism of believing that change can come about if people changed their attitudes, if we all worked together, and if government and industry changed their priorities. However, at the same time their feelings were also dominated by the pessimistic belief that the future was going to get worse and that, as individuals, they could hope to do very little about it. They believed that 'money will always win out over the environment' and that it is often too hard or expensive for people to do more than they are already doing unless government and industry provided economically viable alternatives. The article concluded with a call for greater attention to environmental action competence as a focus in environmental education. It was suggested that this could involve focusing the curriculum upon the development of a realistic sense of hope and optimism through practical experiences in working collaboratively to address issues of environmental quality. Research into the professional development processes and pedagogical strategies that are necessary supports for such a curriculum was also recommended.

Notes on Contributors

All five authors are involved in the Australian component of a study of the environmental knowledge and attitudes of young people in 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The Australian research has been funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council which has also supported the international coordination of the wider study. *Correspondence:* John Fien, Griffith University, Nathane, Brisbane 4111, Australia.

SHARON CONNELL and JOHN FIEN work in the Centre for Innovation and Research in Environmental Education at Griffith University in Brisbane. Sharon completed her Master of Environmental Education thesis as part of this study.

DAVID YENCKEN is Emeritus Professor in Environmental Planning at the University of Melbourne and the Immediate-Past President of the Australian Conservation Foundation.

HELEN SYKES is now an independent educational researcher with a special interest in the development of innovative programmes for young people 'at-risk'.

JENNY LEE is a research student in environmental planning at the University of Melbourne.

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Appendix 1

- What are your main hopes and fears about the future?
- What does the word 'environment' mean to you, from your own point of view?
- Through your life, how have you found out about the environment?
  Prompt: How adequate do you think these sources are for you?
- What are your major concerns about the environment?
  Prompt: How serious do you think these concerns are?
  Prompt: How does this make you feel?
  Prompt: Do you think older people share your concerns?
- What do you think causes environmental problems in general?
- Are problems more or less serious in Australia than overseas?
- What is being done to improve the environment?
  Prompt: Do you think we are doing enough?
  Prompt: What stops us dealing adequately with environmental problems?
- What changes are necessary so we can look after the environment more effectively?
- Do you think you can do anything for the environment?
  Prompt: Do you think you will be able to influence others?
  Prompt: Do you think you will be able to do anything in the future to help the environment?