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This research investigated Education for Sustainability (EfS) at an independent primary school in Perth, Australia. A longitudinal case study involving analysis of data from a twenty year period was conducted to determine the effectiveness of EfS. Historical information about EfS from 1990 to 2005 was examined, with the main focus of the study being on the impact of the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) between 2005 and 2009.

Three school-based EfS issues were studied. Firstly, the research aimed to determine what elements of EfS were in operation in the school prior to involvement in AuSSI. Secondly, student outcomes including engagement with whole systems thinking, attitudes and values, knowledge and understandings, and skills and behaviours related to EfS, were investigated during the first five years of participation in AuSSI. Thirdly, teacher perceptions of the EfS program were examined.

A constructivist, phenomenological, case study approach was employed to enable in-depth investigation of EfS in the life of the school prior to, during and post implementation of AuSSI. This approach facilitated revelation of participants' lived experiences and their understandings of EfS. Data was gathered through surveys, interviews, observation and document analysis. Eleven teachers and seventy five students participated.

Findings demonstrated student outcomes related to EfS moved between ‘silo’ and ‘whole systems thinking’ positions on a sustainability continuum for schools. Following participation in AuSSI a shift from silo to whole systems thinking and behaviour was documented. However, this position on the continuum was short lived; student understandings and actions shifted towards a silo approach after three years in AuSSI. Teacher perceptions of the EfS program reflected similar shifts.

This longitudinal study contributed to EfS in both theory and application. It built on limited research about whole systems thinking as the theory underpinning EfS programs. Through the development of the sustainability continuum it examined the turbulent journey of a school as it moved between ‘silo’ and ‘whole systems’ approaches to EfS, thereby challenging evidence from short term studies that overwhelmingly report positive outcomes from EfS programs. Finally, the study provided empirical evidence of EfS outcomes for students and teachers, enriching earlier, largely anecdotal evidence.

(350 words)

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