

# **SCHOOL-AS-COMMUNITY: BRIDGING THE GAP TO SUSTAINABILITY**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## ABSTRACT

In this research I explore ways in which teachers and parents can enhance the sustainability agenda to bridge the gap towards sustainability through the creation of caring, democratic, just, ecologically regenerative schools-as-communities. I learned that we can only transform ourselves and not others, therefore to transform the model of experience of schooling *and* society, we need to transform *ourselves*, the whole community of the school, towards sustainability. This follows the work of Sterling (2001, 2002a and 2002b) which illustrates that education and society will need to change together in a mutually affirming way, since there is no linear cause-effect relationship.

This dissertation focuses on one aspect of the developing field of education for sustainability (EfS). I use radical ecology as the philosophy which supports the vision of community transformation towards sustainability (Orr 2002; Fien 2001; and Sterling 2001). I use the emancipatory research paradigm and detail a participatory epistemology fused with a holistic, constructivist notion of reality, to situate a participative approach which enables important interdisciplinary connections to be made. The research comprises ethnographic research and cooperative inquiry projects that were implemented at two small community schools, as well as reflective practice to develop personal and professional practices of sustainability. Contemporary work in the field of EfS has a cultural understanding of sustainability, which uses four pillars: the biophysical, the social-cultural, the economic and the political. The political pillar is the key organising principle for this research.

The research is significant because I develop and build upon Sterling's (2001) notion of transformative learning for sustainability. I show that participatory structures, procedures and processes are necessary, but not sufficient for a socially transformative school-as-community culture and that socio-ecologically contextualised knowing is transformative knowledge about community sustainability. For people to behave in

cooperative ways, they need to develop a practical, reconnective knowledge of cooperation. Likewise, for people to behave in ecologically regenerative ways, they need to develop a practical, reconnective knowledge of ecological reconnection. The research methods of reflective practice and cooperative inquiry are discussed and evaluated as vehicles for transformation towards sustainability. The dissertation thereby assesses their effectiveness in enabling the development of practical knowledge about sustainability.

In Australia, over the last decade our federal government has shown little interest in fulfilling its own narrowly defined ecological sustainability policy commitments. In Western Australia, our government has recently launched a comprehensive State Sustainability Strategy however its major weakness is that it has afforded very low significance to education at a time when major international organisations such as UNESCO (2002b) see education as an integral part of sustainability and learning as a key to a sustainable future. Sadly, the State Sustainability Strategy does not recommend a reorientation of the education system towards sustainability, does not incorporate a socially critical view of education, and almost completely overlooks the role of learning in the social task of change towards sustainability. In Western Australia, we urgently need policies and political action for commitment through structural reorientation towards Efs. Even in the face of this, a multi-perspectival, inclusive approach to the development of civil society through devolved, locally-based decision making and action within a school community can facilitate the emergence of learning for sustainability in that community. Even within a context of contradiction, tension and paradox, it is possible for school communities to contribute to sustainability through reconnective transformative learning.

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