



# Sustainable Schools in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: Meeting the challenge?

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## *Abstract*

*Within UNESCO's conception of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), schools should be implementing approaches to teaching and learning that integrate goals for conservation, social justice, appropriate development and democracy into a vision and a mission of personal and social change. ESD also involves developing the kinds of civic virtues and skills that can empower all citizens and, through them, our social institutions, to play leading roles in the transition to a sustainable future. As such, ESD encompasses a vision for global society that is not only ecologically sustainable but also one that is socially and economically sustainable. This paper traces the history of ESD in Victorian schools and analyses the current sustainability policies and initiatives in terms of their achievement of the educational, environmental, economic and social indicators of ESD. It also problematises the feasibility, and desirability, of any one programme being able to incorporate all aspects of ESD as elaborated by UNESCO.*

## *Introduction*

Environmental education in formal education in Victoria (Australia) has a long history. Some organisations, such as the Gould League, trace their involvement in kindred movements such as bird protection and nature study back to their foundation in 1908 as the Gould League of Bird Lovers. Other organisations are perhaps more realistic and date their commitment to environmental education to the rise of the movement in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> However, all have traditionally focused on education in, about and for the *natural* environment. The built environment and other aspects of the environment in its totality did not rate highly in the practice of environmental education in Victoria for much of the history, despite the guiding principle from the UNESCO-UNEP Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education that 'environmental education should consider the environment in its totality – natural and built, technological and social (economic, political, technological, cultural-historical, moral, aesthetic)' (UNESCO, 1978:27).

Internationally, during the 1980s and 1990s, use of the language of sustainable development and sustainability began to emerge, popularised by the World Conservation Strategy in 1980, the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (the Brundtland Commission) and revisited in 1992 through the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro). Since this time, a much stronger

emphasis has been placed upon trying to integrate thinking and action around ecological, social and economic systems.

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development has its origins in the succession of international environmental events which culminated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002. Here, previous notions of environmental education (EE) were 'broadened to encompass social justice and the fight against poverty as key principles of development that is sustainable. The human and social aspects of sustainable development meant that solidarity, equity, partnership and cooperation were as crucial as scientific approaches to environmental protection' (UNESCO, 2004:7). This broadened notion is known as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), or Education for Sustainability (EfS) in some places. This is not the place to debate about the differences between EE and ESD or EfS,<sup>2</sup> but the paper does examine the slide between EE and EfS in Australian and Victorian government statements, to the point of direct substitution.

At a simplistic level, environmental education and education for sustainable development are concerned with achieving the same ends: enabling learners to question unsustainable practices and participate in changing these practices. The difference is in the scope covered in achieving this goal, and in the focus. Environmental education has traditionally been problem-focused: its goals and objectives have usually referred to the environment and its associated problems, and resolving these. Education for sustainable development encompasses environmental education, setting it in the broader context of socio-cultural factors and the socio-political issues of equity, poverty, democracy and quality of life, as well as a development perspective on social change and evolving circumstances. It still has much in common with earlier conceptions of environmental education, including objectives encouraging critical thinking, values analysis and active citizenship in environmental contexts, but differs in that ESD is envisaged as 'ultimately about education and capacity building and only secondly about environmental problem-solving' (Fien, 2001:19).

Implementing ESD in schools involves approaches to teaching and learning that integrate goals for conservation, social justice, appropriate development and democracy into a vision and a mission of personal and social change. It also involves developing the kinds of civic virtues and skills that can empower all citizens and, through them, our social institutions, to play leading roles in the transition to a sustainable future. As such, ESD encompasses a vision for global society that is not only ecologically sustainable but also one that is socially and economically sustainable. Thus, the key areas identified with the concept of ESD, and interlinked through the dimension of culture, are society, environment and economy. In this paper I wish to problematise the possibilities that such a vision is achievable through schools, including those that would, from their rhetoric, seem to be designed to achieve such goals.

The Sustainable Schools programme in Victoria, Australia, is concerned with developing learning environments and learning experiences that will enable students to work towards having a good quality of life in a sustainable environment. The experiences of schools in the Sustainable Schools programme provide some insights into how ESD is being implemented in Victorian schools so that it achieves its goals for the development of society. Drawing on findings from a recent evaluation of the experiences of six Sustainable Schools in terms of

their achievement of educational, environmental, economic and social indicators of quality education (Gough, 2004; 2005), the paper also problematises the feasibility, and desirability, of any one programme being able to incorporate all aspects of ESD as elaborated by UNESCO (2004).

The specific research questions to be addressed firstly relate to the operation of the programme within the schools and secondly to the relationship between the Sustainable Schools programme and the UNESCO ESD agenda:

- Is the overall approach working?
- Does it meet the needs of schools?
- What outcomes have been achieved by the schools?
- What is the relationship between the Sustainable Schools programme and the UNESCO ESD agenda?

Environmental education has been marginalised within educational discourses for more than three decades, but the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development agenda could be seen as an attempt to centralise ESD in educational discourses, particularly as it interweaves a range of international initiatives, including the Millennium Development Goal process, the Education for All movement and the United Nations Literacy Decade with ESD.

### *History of Environmental Education in Victoria*

Environmental education in schools in Victoria has been supported by the Department of Education since the 1960s (or even earlier in some instances). This support has included the Department's own activities and the secondment of teachers to various environment-related organisations to work with teachers and students. The Department formed an Environmental Education Curriculum Committee in 1983 to help guide its further work in the area, and disbanded it at the end of 1987 to focus on implementing the State Conservation Strategy.

In 1987, the Victorian government announced its full support for the establishment of environmental education in Victorian schools as part of a *State Conservation Strategy* which stated explicitly that, as government policy, environmental education should be part of the school curriculum and that schools should develop their own policies for environmental education.

As part of this policy, the government provided resources and support materials to assist and promote the implementation of environmental education in Victorian schools. For example, the Victorian Environmental Education Council (VEEC) was established in 1989 'to coordinate, monitor and advise on environmental education and assist in the development of environmental education strategies and projects across the state' (Government of Victoria, 1987:92). VEEC was disbanded in December 1993 following a change in state government.

In 1990, Victoria's Ministry of Education launched a *Ministerial Policy on Environmental Education* which encouraged schools to develop an environmental education curriculum that involves all students throughout their years of schooling, and the entire school community — students, staff and parents. The policy recognised that environmental education may be a separate subject in the curriculum or it may be incorporated in a number of areas in the curriculum. For example, Victoria has had a separate subject at senior secondary school level

since the 1970s. The 1990 policy also recognised a number of other traditional approaches to incorporating environmental education into the school curriculum through one-off events, including topics in subjects, or through electives.

This policy was replaced in 1998 by *Investing in the Future: Environmental Education for Victoria's Schools* (Education Victoria, 1998). Although the state government changed in 1999, this policy has not yet been rescinded, but a successor document is mooted for the near future to complement *The Way Forward: An Environmental Sustainability Strategy for the Department of Education and Training* (DET, 2005) and *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* (DEH, 2005). Current initiatives acknowledged in *The Way Forward* include:

- Schools are integrating sustainability education through implementing the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)<sup>3</sup>
- The Sustainable Schools initiative provides a whole school planning approach to integrate curriculum planning and facilities management to promote environmental action. Over 140 schools in metropolitan, rural and regional areas are using components of the programme
- The Strategic Partnerships programme provides funding for over 20 organisations to deliver environmental education programmes in schools, including the funding of an environmental network that has enabled the sharing of the work of organisations, the promotion of collaborative partnerships and the facilitation of professional development opportunities
- The Department's Facilities and Infrastructure Division has undertaken a range of initiatives to investigate Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) opportunities in schools

This Strategy differs from the previous policies in that it is taking a 'whole Department' approach, similar to the 'whole school' approach adopted in the Sustainable Schools initiative. It is also different in that the Department is accountable to the Government to achieve certain outcomes (as part of the Environmental Sustainability Framework (DSE, 2005a)), whereas schools were not accountable in the previous policies (and still are not accountable). According to the Strategy (DET, 2005:2):

The Department is committed to achieving the Government goals and targets for environmental sustainability and developing Victorians' knowledge and skill base to appropriately respond to pressures on the environment. The Department will do this by:

- improving the environmental performance of the Department's corporate, TAFE [Technical and Further Education] and school facilities,
- increasing awareness and understanding of environmental sustainability in the Department, our stakeholders and the wider community, and
- supporting whole school planning in education for a sustainable environment in schools through student learning.

### *The Transition to ESD/EfS*

Developments in environmental education in Victoria have tended to follow international trends. For example, the Victorian Environmental Education Council's environmental education strategy (VEEC, 1992:7) invokes the authority of UNESCO-UNEP in noting that 'a comprehensive, widely accepted and enduring description of environmental education was adopted by the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education at Tbilisi, in the former USSR, in 1977' and proceeds to use this as a framework for action. It is therefore not unexpected that the language of sustainability is beginning to permeate education policy documents to match the changes in international discourses. The most recent of these documents is the Department of Sustainability and Environment's draft *Learning to Live Sustainably* Strategy and Action Plan, which invokes the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) as its international contextualising document (DSE, 2005b:21).

The language of sustainable development in an educational context has been around for over two decades. For example, one of the 'strategic principles' in the National Conservation Strategy for Australia (NCSA) was to 'educate the community about the interdependence of sustainable development and conservation' (DHAE, 1984:16). Similar language is used in the Environment Australia (2000) document *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan*:

Environmental education is defined in its broadest sense to encompass raising awareness, acquiring new perspectives, values, knowledge and skills, and formal and informal processes leading to changed behaviour in support of an ecologically sustainable environment.

The extensive discussions in the literature about the differences between environmental education and education for sustainable development seem to have been overlooked by the Australian – and the Victorian – governments. At the national level there has been a shift from 'environmental education' to 'education for (environmental) sustainability' within Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) activities. Nationally, carriage for implementing the United Nations Decade rests solidly with the Department of the Environment and Heritage which hosts the Australian Government's home page for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development ([www.deh.gov.au/education/decade/index.html](http://www.deh.gov.au/education/decade/index.html)) – indeed there is no mention of the Decade on the Department of Education, Science and Training's website. Given the national level association of the Decade with the Australian Government's environment department, it is perhaps not surprising that the shift from environmental education to 'education for (environmental) sustainability' has unquestioningly occurred.

For example, even though she acknowledges that 'Education for sustainable development addresses the complexity and interconnectedness of problems such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, health, conflict and the violation of human rights', in her statement on Australian Government engagement with the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014, Cornish (2005)

specifically refers to developing and expanding existing programmes, including:

- the National Environmental Education Council (NEEC) continuing its role of identifying and advising the Minister for the Environment and Heritage on key priorities in Education for Sustainability, and providing national leadership in this area;
- *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* (DEH, 2005), which refers to both environmental education and education for environmental sustainability, apparently accepting a broader conceptualisation – ‘environmental education has now evolved in the 21st century to embody sustainability in its broadest sense’ (DEH, 2005:6) – but then only focusing on environmental sustainability in the remainder of the document; and
- the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative, which focuses on developing environmental sustainability in schools, ‘is one of the leading initiatives in support of the Decade’ (Smith, 2006:2): ‘Through this initiative the whole school community is actively involved in making their school more sustainable, while teachers have much needed access to professional development in environmental education’ (Cornish, 2005).

At both national and Victorian levels, the dominant terminology is education for sustainability (Efs) (with an emphasis on environmental sustainability) rather than education for sustainable development (ESD). Such terminology is consistent with that used by Fien (2001) and in New Zealand (PCE, 2004), but inconsistent with developments elsewhere in the world – and different from that of the United Nations Decade.

### *DESD as Interpreted in Victoria*

The current Victorian Labor government, elected in late 1999, has a comprehensive environmental reform agenda. This includes the Victorian Greenhouse Strategy (DNRE, 2002) which sets energy consumption reduction targets to address the challenge of climate change, and the Environmental Sustainability Framework (Department of Sustainability and the Environment, 2005a) which brings together environmental sustainability and economic wellbeing. This Framework has a companion state-wide draft *Learning to Live Sustainably* Strategy and Action Plan (DSE, 2005b) which aims to ‘position Victoria as a world leader in education and behaviour change for environmental sustainability’ (2005b:5), and as mentioned above, the Department of Education and Training has developed *The Way Forward: An Environmental Sustainability Strategy for the Department of Education and Training* (DET, 2005) as a subsequent related strategy. However, despite all of these documents appearing in 2005, it is only the draft *Learning to Live Sustainably* Strategy document which refers to the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). This Strategy ‘coincides with and will be linked to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014)’ (2005b:6) and its ‘objective of giving an enhanced profile to the central role of education and learning in the common pursuit of sustainable development’ (2005b:21).

Overall, in both Victoria and nationally, up until the present time, the Decade has had a very low profile and has been interpreted as an environmental sustainability agenda rather than one which includes social and economic sustainability. The narrowness of this response is obvious

when compared with the 15 strategic perspectives ‘and the connections between them [which] must inform education and learning for sustainable development’ (UNESCO, 2004:17):

*Socio-cultural perspectives*

- Human rights
- Peace and human security
- Gender equality
- Cultural diversity and intercultural understanding
- Health
- HIV/AIDS
- Governance

*Environmental perspectives*

- Natural resources
- Climate change
- Rural transformation
- Sustainable urbanisation
- Disaster prevention and mitigation

*Economic perspectives*

- Poverty reduction
- Corporate responsibility and accountability
- Market economy

### *Sustainable Schools Initiative*

The Sustainable Schools initiative is a key part of the response to the Decade both in Victoria and nationally. Australia’s Sustainable Schools programmes developed contemporaneously with eco-school and green school programmes in other countries. This, in some ways unfortunately named<sup>4</sup> initiative, also developed differently at the same time in two Australian states.

In New South Wales, the programme employed and trained a team of facilitators to assist schools to prepare a School Environmental Management Plan, whereas in Victoria, Sustainable Schools provides a holistic education programme on sustainability for schools, building on the expertise of the many different groups already working in this field. The focus of the programme is on quadruple bottom-line outcomes – educational, environmental, social and economic. In 2004 the programme became a national one, funded by the Department of the Environment and Heritage. According to Cornish (2005:5–6):

Through this initiative the whole school community is actively involved in making their school more sustainable, while teachers have much needed access to professional development in environmental education<sup>5</sup>... While the implementation of sustainable schools in each State and Territory is different and responds to the demands of local education systems as well as the roles of participating NGOs, the programme embodies a strongly collaborative approach.

In breaking down the silo mentality and approaching environmental and educational outcomes in a holistic manner, the Sustainable Schools initiative puts into practice much of the thinking and strategies behind the Decade. The Decade represents an opportunity to continue to build this programme, and to further explore innovative partnerships.

A national Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) framework is currently being developed (Smith, 2006). This framework acknowledges and draws upon similar international initiatives: ENSI Eco-Schools, FEE International Eco-Schools, China's Green Schools Project, Sweden's Green School Award Programme and New Zealand's Enviroschools programme.<sup>6</sup>

The Sustainable Schools initiative in Australia, and its equivalents in other countries, embody a different vision of education and administration of schools. School grounds development projects, such as *Learning through Landscapes* (Adams, 1990), *Learnsapes* ([www.learnsapes.org](http://www.learnsapes.org)) and *Bringing School Grounds Alive* (Smith, 1975), shifted the emphasis for environmental education in schools from the curriculum to also consider the educational context, but, in Australia, it was not until innovations such as the Gould League's Waste Wise Schools programme<sup>7</sup> that there was a focus on promoting cultural change across the whole school community (in this instance by providing teachers with a framework for the whole school community to effectively introduce and maintain a waste and litter minimisation programme in a school (Armstrong *et al.*, 2003). A recent survey of international literature in environmental education for the New Zealand Ministry of Education noted that 'whole-school approaches are advocated as best supporting the implementation of Environmental Education in a way that reflects the goals, aims, and purposes of this area ... Whole school approaches also appear to be most successful when they build on the existing culture, priorities, and values of schools and their communities' (Bolstad *et al.*, 2004:95).

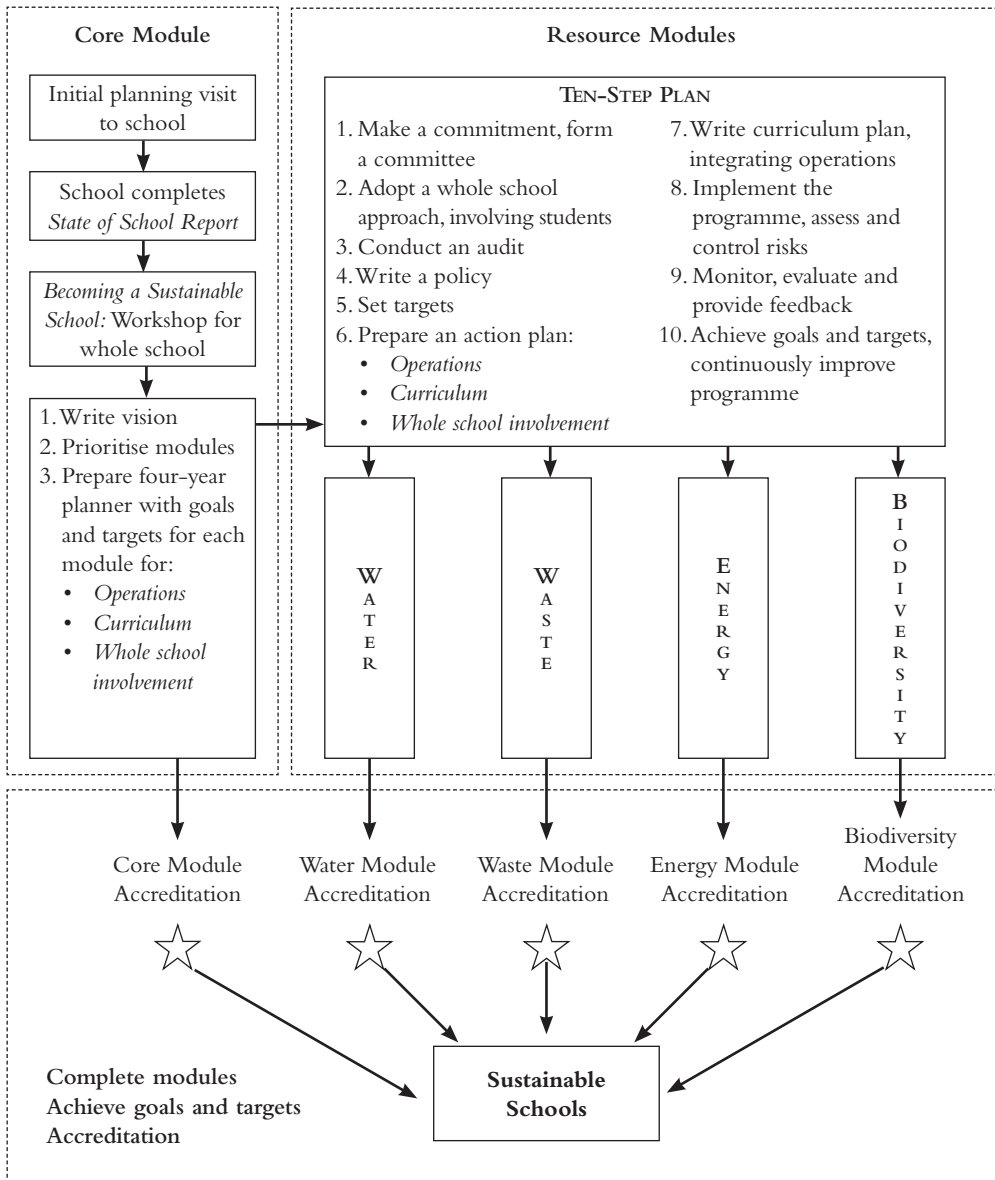
In Victoria, Sustainable Schools integrates changes to the practical operations of the school with sustainability issues in the curriculum, and helps to build links to local communities. It provides participating schools with:

- Customised professional development, in which schools choose the Core unit and the sequence for the four optional themes
- The Core unit ('Schools Becoming Sustainable'), which includes stimulating professional development for teachers about the direction and purpose of education for sustainability, and strategies to develop an overall long-term plan for sustainability for the school
- Coordination, guidance and support
- Specialist consultants in each of the four optional themes (Water, Waste, Energy and School Grounds/Biodiversity)<sup>8</sup>

Central to the Sustainable Schools process is the Ten-Step plan which is designed as an action research process to ensure commitment and ownership of the initiative by the whole school community, not just an enthusiastic individual (and so is much more likely to be sustainable). This Ten-Step plan is followed through the implementation of the core module and each of the four resource modules. When schools have completed a module and achieved their goals and targets, they apply for accreditation. This process is summarised in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Sustainable Schools process (after Armstrong and Bottomley, 2003:14)



In 2004, I evaluated six Sustainable Schools in Victoria, all of which are working towards a sustainable future through their school operations, curriculum and whole school involvement. The focus for my evaluation was their work in the area of water management (Stormwater Action Project), but this was within the broader context of the process of them engaging with

the whole Sustainable Schools programme. The evaluation related to the schools' experiences in trialling the implementation of water/stormwater-related themes in their curriculum and operations, and retrofitting stormwater equipment to support their water/stormwater programmes. The following discussion is based on the findings from this evaluation study (the full report of the study and summary of the findings have been published elsewhere and will not be repeated here, see Gough 2004; 2005).

Their involvement in Sustainable Schools, and particularly the Stormwater Action Project, has led to each school achieving economic, educational, environmental and social outcomes (see Gough 2004; 2005), together with achievements such as:

- Embedding Sustainable Schools in their school operations and curriculum across all Key Learning Areas
- Engaging student learning
- Involving students in working towards a sustainable future
- Developing extensive links with their local (and often broader) communities
- High staff and student morale in the school
- Establishing a basis for future development as a Sustainable School and model for others

For some, these schools are achieving a quadruple bottom line and can be classified as highly successful and worthy of emulation. The schools have significant financial savings, there are improved environmental outcomes, the educational programmes are leading to improved educational outcomes, and there are social outcomes for students, teachers, parents and the community. However, while their outcomes are many, within a DESD context they have had very limited success in learning for sustainable development as their achievements are solely within the natural resources component of the environmental perspective, with no contribution towards learning in the other strategic fourteen perspectives of ESD. Indeed, the focus of the Sustainable Schools initiative is consistent with the description of environmental education contained in the UNESCO Decade implementation plan with its focus on 'humankind's relationship with the natural environment and on ways to conserve and preserve it and properly steward its resources', and without 'the broader context of socio-cultural factors and the socio-political issues of equity, poverty, democracy and quality of life' (2004:16).

This observation is not unique; Henderson and Tilbury (2004:29) note that the socio-cultural dimensions of EFS do not appear as prominent components in international examples of whole school programmes like Sustainable Schools. The six schools I evaluated are also manifesting the evolution 'from a narrow environmental management or practical greening focus to a more holistic focus of sustainability and promoting the development of participatory learning and decision-making skills associated with EFS' noted by Henderson and Tilbury (2004:29).

As well as a focus on school operations and whole school involvement, there are clear links to the curriculum contained within the Sustainable Schools model, but these links are limited to the four areas of energy, water, waste and biodiversity rather than the fifteen strategic perspectives of the DESD agenda. However, Sustainable Schools is focusing on important areas: Australia's green credentials aren't as good as we think. The recently released Environmental Performance Index reveals that Australia is lagging behind on water consumption, air quality, sustainable energy and biodiversity protection. Australia came 20th out of 133 nations – behind

New Zealand, Sweden, Finland, Czech Republic, Austria, Britain, Denmark, Canada, Malaysia and Ireland (Center for Environmental Law and Policy, 2006).

Nevertheless, this does raise questions about Sustainable Schools in the context of the DESD agenda, especially when the initiative is seen as so central to the implementation of the agenda in Australia and Victoria:

- Should the narrow focus of Sustainable Schools compared with the DESD agenda be seen as a deficiency in Sustainable Schools? That is, is it enough to turn off lights and plant native trees?
- Should Sustainable Schools broaden their agenda to take into account the other perspectives of the DESD agenda?
- Is the DESD agenda too broad to be implemented within such programmes as Sustainable Schools? If so, how should it be implemented in schools?

### *Working at the Margins of Sustainability and Education*

In responding to the first of these questions, an important consideration is whether the Sustainable Schools initiative will become part of the core focus of all schools, or whether it will continue to be an initiative for the minority. At present, just over 140 schools out of nearly 2 000 in Victoria are part of the Sustainable Schools programme in Victoria, and currently there are no plans by the Department of Education and Training to expand the programme. The Australian Government funding is mainly focused on rolling out the programme in other States and Territories, so the growth potential for the programme in Victoria is limited to those schools who can afford to buy the delivery of the professional development programmes for their staff. This would seem to be working to keep Sustainable Schools at the margins of educational reforms, even though the initiative is given a high profile in the implementation strategy for the Decade by the Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage, and in the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

The Department of Education and Training's *The Way Forward: An Environmental Sustainability Strategy for the Department of Education and Training* (DET, 2005) also has great confidence in the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS; VCAA, 2005) providing a framework for implementing education for sustainability. 'VELS have been designed to support students in developing a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours which will prepare them to create a future which: is sustainable – developing an understanding of the interaction between social, economic and environmental systems and how to manage them' (James, 2006:26). However, while VELS are providing a model for curriculum in Victoria which encourages different starting points for addressing the question 'What do students need to know and what should they be able to do to succeed in the future?', the implementation of the standards 'which support, and demonstrate the multidisciplinary nature of sustainability education' (James, 2006:26) is the responsibility of the individual teacher and school, and without a whole school approach to education for sustainability to underpin what students and teachers are learning, the standards will be isolated accountabilities in students' and teachers' lives. Here, I converge with Scott's concern that 'ESD has to involve more than a string of unconnected activities' (2005:4), and there is a danger that

by teaching a string of unconnected standards teachers might assume that they were doing ESD.

Thus, although sustainability is more central to the focus of VELs than in previous curriculum models, it is still marginalised through the operationalisation of the standards into learning programmes for students. In addition, teachers have struggled to implement environmental education under previous simpler curriculum Key Learning Area-based models, such as the Victorian Curriculum and Standards Framework, so it is debatable that they will be able to implement the more complex ESD perspectives within a more complex three-stranded curriculum model without considerable support, which does not seem to be forthcoming.

Statements related to environmental education or education for sustainable development/sustainability still generally come from environment agencies rather than education departments, which is an ongoing problem for moving the field from the margins as they reinforce the field as a political rather than an educational priority. Four examples stand out here:

- The lead document for Education for Sustainability in Victoria, *Learning to Live Sustainably*, is being developed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE, 2005a)
- *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A National Statement on Environmental Education for Schools* was sponsored by the Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH, 2005)
- The Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative is being funded by the Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage
- The Australian Government's website for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is hosted by the Department of the Environment and Heritage

Even when statements related to environmental education or education for sustainable development come from education departments they are often toothless tigers as they are generally guidelines and not mandated or accountable which again reinforces their marginal status.

## *Conclusion*

The UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development International Implementation Scheme (2004) is very strong in distinguishing between environmental education and education for sustainable development. However, in Australia, there is much evidence that the two are being conflated with (environmental) education for sustainability and non-natural resources perspectives are being overlooked. This conflation or, in some instances, word substitution in government documents is creating some degree of confusion. Nevertheless, many of those formerly identified as environmental educators (see, for example, Fien 2001; Henderson & Tilbury 2004), and the Australian Association for Environmental Education, seem to have embraced the DESD agenda. While not embracing the new agenda might be seen as recalcitrant, the embracing of the new agenda without there being changes in practices would seem to be problematic. There is much evidence from the Sustainable Schools initiative discussed earlier in this paper that would seem to support the assertion that Sustainable Schools are working within an EE rather than an ESD framework.

The DESD agenda is very much concerned with education, learning and capacity building rather than problem solving (Fien, 2001; Scott, 2005), but it is difficult to see the agenda being achieved within formal education when the carriage for the Decade and related activities in Australia and Victoria rests with environment departments rather than education departments. Until the vision and accountabilities are forthcoming from the education departments, the agenda will remain on the margins for schools.

The vision of environmental education or education for sustainable development considering the environment in its totality (with environmental, social and economic perspectives/pillars) is a long-standing one. However, in Australia and Victoria, this is still being interpreted as an environmental sustainability agenda in terms of current strategies and frameworks, so this begs the question of when, how and by whom the social and economic pillars of sustainability are to be taken seriously in formal education within an ESD context. Who is going to develop the frameworks for government action in these perspectives? This also leads to a related question: is the DESD agenda too broad for serious consideration within formal education in schools? Experience so far in Victoria would seem to indicate it is.

### *Notes on the Contributor*

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### *Endnotes*

- 1 The Gould League website ([www.gould.vic.edu.au](http://www.gould.vic.edu.au), accessed 14 May 2006) claims that they were involved in environmental education from 1960–1990, however, the term ‘environmental education’ cannot be traced to earlier than 1964 (USA) and 1965 (UK) (see Gough 1997 for a discussion of this history which draws on Martin (1975), Schoenfeld (1979) and Wheeler (1975)).
- 2 According to Lang (2004:7), education for sustainable development and education for sustainability should not be used interchangeably ‘as the concepts encode different emphases’: ‘education for sustainable development focuses on the learning process required to support sustainable development’ whereas ‘education for sustainability has its emphasis in building capacity to live more sustainably’. These subtleties in semantics seem to have escaped most writers in this area in Australia.
- 3 Victorian Essential Learning Standards are part of the education reform agenda contained in Blueprint for Government Schools (DET, 2003).
- 4 When asked if he would like to be a sustainable school one Queensland principal replied that yes, he would like to know that his budget and staffing were sustainable.
- 5 The first sentence in this quote from Cornish exemplifies the Australian Government’s approach to Education for Sustainability where it is seen as interchangeable with environmental education, even in

Sustainable Schools.

- 6 There are also Eco-Schools in South Africa and Green Schools in Taiwan, to name but two similar initiatives.
- 7 The Waste Wise Schools programme, which began in Victoria in 1998, offers a package of support services to schools to assist them to develop and run their own waste and litter programmes, covering both curriculum and school operating practices. This support includes a comprehensive resource kit; funding towards teacher release for professional development; professional development for teachers and waste educators; ongoing access to specialist advice; a network of support schools to provide working examples of best practice approaches; a website ([www.gould.edu.au/wastewise](http://www.gould.edu.au/wastewise)); annual Awards; and Waste Wise Schools accreditation. The aim of the programme is that all schools in Victoria will, sometime in the near future, actively engage in waste wise and other environmentally sustainable practices as part of their school programme. The Waste Wise Schools programme is seen as an important vehicle by which this can be achieved. A key part of the programme is to encourage and support schools to work directly with their local communities to achieve learning and action for a sustainable future.
- 8 The four optional themes are: 'Waste' (waste and litter minimisation, green purchasing, recycling and composting), 'Energy' (energy efficiency, renewable energy and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions), 'Water' (water conservation, stormwater control and freshwater ecology), and 'School Grounds/Biodiversity' (developing a whole school Masterplan which may include indigenous gardens that attract native butterflies and birds, and special theme gardens and habitats). Participating schools are able to choose all or some of the four optional themes.

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