

Do young people in Australian educational systems receive adequate support to feel empowered in engaging with Sustainable Development Goals?

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ABSTRACT: With the anticipated rise of over double the Paris Agreement's 2°C goal, climate change is likely to jeopardize the prosperity of future generations. Thus, it has become increasingly apparent that young demographics must be integrated into the process required to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) owing to their disproportionately threatened futures over that of adult demographics. A major barrier to children engaging with SDG progress is evident in Australian educational policies, which fail to provide adequate opportunities for young people. Moreover, a lack of individual autonomy in young people can lead to feelings of disempowerment regarding sustainability. Hence, at the present moment, young people in Australian educational institutions are deprived of adequate support systems that could help them feel empowered by contributing to sustainability progress. Research methods undertaken for this paper include literature review, interviews with Australian students and teachers, research into successful international frameworks for youth programs, policy review, and analysis of Australian educational frameworks. Opportunities for empowerment through education and intergenerational support are vital for children to be integrated into the work of SDGs. This fails to transpire within Australian educational institutions. Although there exist various independent organisations which promote tools for youth empowerment throughout Australia, the lack of wider systematic support results in insufficient accessibility for teachers and students alike. Whilst young people possess the capacity to play a role in politically securitising climate change and the achievement of SDGs, supportive systems are required through structural changes, including policy, to initiate progress.

Keywords: Policy, youth empowerment, Sustainable Development Goals

AUTHOR'S NOTE: As a graduate of International Relations, I am interested in analysing the potential for national policy to impact transnational concerns. Sustainability is at the forefront of my research within the current context of escalating threats from climate change upon national security worldwide. I attribute the far-reaching lack of governmental support for sustainable progress to neoliberal reliance upon the commodification of nature, in addition to the challenge of changing behavioural patterns, as two primary barriers to sustainable social transformations. In 2019, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to present a research poster at the International Conference on Sustainable Development. There, one of the presenting categories was 'Engaging Across the Generations: Children and the SDGs'. This prompted me to investigate the Australian school system regarding sustainable development in order to analyse whether Australian educational policy provides adequate frameworks to support young people in achieving sustainable lifestyles and systems more broadly. I was especially interested given the current spotlight on young figures including Greta Thunberg and her symbol for youth empowerment, in addition to my past experience working as a violin teacher and mentor for French students wherein I learned the impact of education upon youth perspectives. The ability for educational institutions to positively or negatively impact the behaviour of young people is of great interest to me, particularly given the increasing international awareness amongst young people regarding sustainability through movements including the School Climate Strikes. By exploring the consequences of Australian education policies upon youth disempowerment and presenting the classroom as opportunity for behavioural change, I hope to encourage conversation regarding solutions to the significant detriment evident in the Australian education system surrounding sustainability.

At the present moment, Australian schools fail to administer meaningful sustainability education to empower young people in engaging with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) owing to a lack of governmental and wider systematic support. An analysis of the Australian 'Cross-Curriculum Priorities' (CCPs) illustrates the inherently tokenistic nature of Australian policies towards sustainable development, presenting a barrier to the empowerment of young people

within Australian educational institutions. Flaws evident among the CCPs generates two-tiered social disempowerment regarding efforts towards sustainability in Australia. The first tier of disempowerment is endured by school teachers and inevitably disperses into the second tier, which is the disempowerment of Australian students. The absence of mandatory training and support for Australian school teachers towards implementing the 'Sustainability' CCP into school curriculums significantly disadvantages

the empowerment of young people. This is demonstrated through the resigned attitude among students towards resolving climate change issues, which occurs in classroom contexts wherein social norms are learned and practiced. Given that behaviour change is indispensable for creating sustainable societies, it is evident that the lack of systematic support within Australian classrooms to encourage constructive practices concerning sustainability generates disempowerment among young populations in engaging with SDGs and, more broadly, sustainability.

Background

Prospects for meaningful sustainable development are threatened globally. This is of immediate concern across Australia, with an economy so reliant on fossil fuel production that it is one of the highest producers of CO₂ emissions per capita internationally (World Bank, 2019). Australia has endured a multitude of harsh climate change ramifications, transpiring most obviously in the form of extreme bushfires which culminated following September 2019. Over 11 million hectares of Australian land was burned, vastly eclipsing the damage sustained in the California and Amazon fires collectively (Chapman, 2020). In addition to destroying thousands of homes and essential ecosystems, the bushfires have killed humans and wildlife directly through the flames, as well as indirectly through the resulting compromised air quality.

The ramifications of extreme weather events mostly affect marginalised social groups, including indigenous communities, who have contributed the least towards harmful emissions. Hence, whilst the harmful environmental effects of climate change are universal in nature, certain population groups are at higher risk than others (White, 2011). In addition to marginalised social groups, entire generations of young people are especially vulnerable to current climatic changes. With global figures anticipating a rise in temperature over double the Paris Agreement's 2°C goal climate change will likely jeopardize the prosperity of future generations unless it is securitised as a national emergency and reflected as such through substantial policy change.

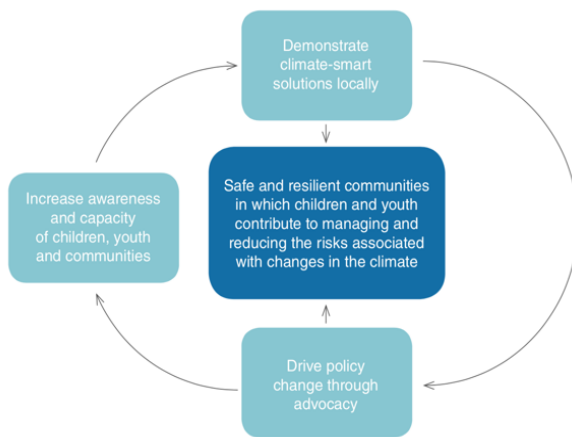
It has become increasingly apparent that young demographics must be integrated into the process required to enact effective sustainable development, owing to the disproportionate threat to their futures over that of adult demographics. Given the absence of comprehensive sustainable policies and frameworks tailored to the Australian context, the SDGs will be utilised as an archetype framework to pursue within Australia for the purpose of this paper. Furthermore, despite the fact

that climate change has been comprehensively proven by scientific research, domestic and international media continue to present the existence and severity of climate change as 'political' debate (White, 2011, p. 14). Therefore, an analysis of Australian education policies is beneficial in order to observe the degree to which young people's education may be influenced by political agendas, and the entailing effects this has on young people's empowerment.

Lack of individual autonomy in young people creates a reliance upon social contexts, including school systems, for support and engagement with SDGs. Additionally, the challenge of producing necessary behaviour change and social norms within Australian society is often regarded as a dominant barrier to implementing sustainable practices nationally (Wicker & Becken, 2013, p. 42). Hence, the need to grant increased analysis and criticism of the Australian education system is productive to strategising society-wide progress into sustainable social systems. As such, classroom contexts offer the opportunity for intervention of commonly learned behaviours which undermine sustainable practices, given that 'norms, like other aspects of a social setting, are dynamic in nature' (Henry, 2010, p. 43). The remainder of this paper shall broadly investigate the Australian primary and secondary education systems, with particular regard to the evidence of support in encouraging young people to reach SDGs and be effectively educated about sustainability.

The Australian Context: Cross-Curriculum Priorities

Australian education policies present a major barrier to young Australians accessing adequate support systems for engagement with SDGs. In particular, fundamental flaws are identifiable in the three 'Cross-Curriculum Priorities' (CCPs), which are applicable to every Australian State under the 2008 Melbourne Declaration. CCPs were introduced to the Australian curriculum in order to 'meet the needs of students by delivering a relevant, contemporary and engaging curriculum that builds on the educational goals of the Melbourne Declaration' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016). The three CCPs consist of: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures,' 'Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia,' and 'Sustainability.' Whilst the inclusion of 'sustainability' amongst the CCPs may imply governmental support for sustainability education and SDG-centred ideology more generally, evidence suggests that, in practice, the CCPs do not result in positive empowerment of young people in achieving SDGs and consequently lead to youth disempowerment.



Cross-cutting issues: Children and youth participation; inclusion; ethnicity; gender; disability; accountability.

Figure 1: Potential for impact from youth participation in contributing to positive social change through engagement with activism and advocacy to promote sustainability through inter-generational support. Image acquired from: Plan International, AYCC + Oaktree report, ‘We Stand As One: Children, Young People and Climate Change’.

The effectiveness of the CCPs is largely undermined by their voluntary nature, wherein the explicit requirement for whether and how Sustainability is taught ensures that Sustainability is ‘neither a priority nor cross-curricular’ (Almeida, Barnes, & Moore, 2018, p. 4). The optional nature of CCPs has equally led to teacher disempowerment regarding teaching the CCPs in classrooms, with teachers experiencing ‘confusion as to how to include them’ amongst an already dense school curriculum (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 135). Henderson and Tilbury note that in order to run a successful and wide-reaching school sustainability program, it must be: ‘relevant (to the school and community ie individually tailored program), resourced (supporting materials/facilitators/long-term financing), reflective, responsive (flexible structure), reformative (have capacity to change according to new ways of thinking and practice)’ (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004, p. 45). It is evident that all of these necessary measures are absent from the CCP framework.

Moreover, the lack of accountability in teaching the Sustainability CCP within Australian school curriculums reveals the weight of both policy and politics upon the capacity for Australian youth to be disempowered in effectively engaging with Sustainability at a crucial point in time. Thus, political support of social welfare sectors, including those listed amongst the CPPs, is crucial to the success of society-wide progress. Whilst opportunities for sustainability education are available, particularly in contexts including extracurricular learning through

independent organisations, varying socioeconomic factors mean that access to these opportunities is not guaranteed for all Australian youth. Hence, only through holistic measures enforced through nation-wide policy may the relevance, effectiveness and longevity of school-wide programs for Sustainability be achieved throughout Australia (Henderson & Tilbury, 2004, p. 46).

While the CCPs should have been developed with genuine commitment to sustainability, the ineffective nature of the policies reveals the priorities to have been engineered to address the interests of Australia’s most powerful, rather than those in subordinated social situations who rely on supportive systems (Salter & Maxwell, 2016, p. 309). This enables the neoliberal economic interests of the Australian state government to continue to exploit fossil fuels through a business-as-usual plan, whilst simultaneously maintaining the façade of governmental dedication to a ‘green agenda’ to the advantage of their own sectional interests (White 2011, p. 14). Hence, despite the inclusion of Sustainability amongst the Australian CCPs, Australian policies regarding Sustainability education merely serve as tokenistic displays of concern for Sustainability, rather than a genuine commitment to combating the effects of climate change through SDG guidance or similar frameworks. Australian policy undermines sustainability education for young people, leading to their disempowerment.

Two-Tiered Social Disempowerment

Fundamental flaws within the CCPs lead to two-tiered social disempowerment regarding SDG engagement, and sustainability more broadly. The first tier of social disempowerment is evident among school teachers within Australian educational institutions, who find it difficult to implement the Sustainability CCP. In addition to an overwhelming lack of awareness regarding vital sustainability frameworks (particularly including that of the SDGs), Australian teachers report that they do not understand the concept of sustainability, demonstrating a key barrier to the implementation of the Sustainability CCP (Green & Somerville, 2015, p. 832-833). Nicholls and Thorne note that findings from two Queensland doctoral studies on teachers’ understanding of climate change education concluded that the Sustainability CCP had ‘little to no impact on teaching and learning in the participant schools’, further noting that ‘school culture and principals do not support implementation of education for sustainability’ (Nicholls & Thorne, 2017, p. 197). Hence, any hypothetical benefit of the CCPs is diluted through personal biases and practiced social norms within the context of Australian schools owing to lack of accountability.

Prompt: I feel that other people will take my opinions on climate change seriously.

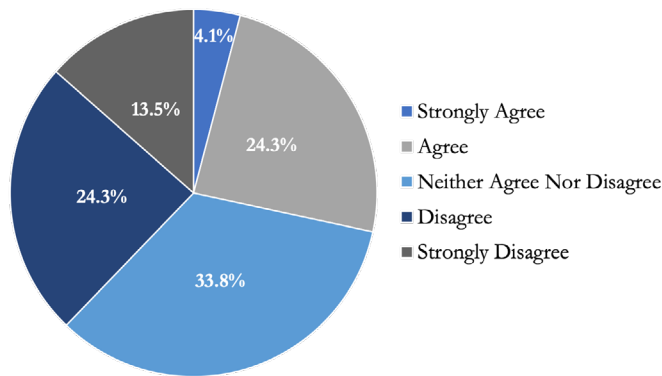


Figure 2: Australian youth opinion on being taken seriously on the topic of climate change. Data acquired from: Millennium Kids Inc. report, ‘Young People of Australia Climate Change: Perceptions and Concerns’.

Despite the reluctance of many Australian schools to implement the Sustainability CCP into formal education, opportunities for personally invested teachers do exist through the work and available resources of various NGOs that provide sustainability tools for teachers to employ in class learning. For example, Eco-Schools is a ‘curriculum linked, democratic and participatory program’ that provides accessible resources for students to gain a better education on sustainability in the schooling context (Eco-Schools Australia, 2019). However, despite the availability of resources for Australian teachers to utilise, the lack of wider systematic support, including that of financial resources, regularly prevents teachers from effectively integrating such tools into classroom activities. Additionally, proactive engagement with external resources requires personal interest in sustainability from teachers, which further highlights inconsistencies within the Sustainability CCP. Ferreira, Ryan, Davis, and Cavanagh emphasise that education for sustainability must be mainstreamed into ‘pre-service teacher education so that it becomes part of its core focus and activity, embedded in practices and policies,’ in efforts to push ‘beyond the addition of sustainability into the curriculum, to the broad-scale adoption and re-orientation of the entire system’ (Ferreira, Ryan, Davis, & Cavanagh, 2009). It is evident that teachers require access to professional development, tools, and support when implementing the Sustainability CCP, given that, ‘until teachers can identify and conceptualize what sustainability looks like in their own teaching context, policies, curriculum innovations, and accountability are

voiceless in the classroom’ (Almeida, Barnes & Moore 2018, p. 14-15).

Although some external sustainability organisations have generated a degree of success in select schools, external resources often lack credibility and efficacy due to the absence of system-wide support through mandatory policy. For example, whilst Victoria and New South Wales were involved with a successful trial of the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative implemented by the federal government in 2005, broader systematic roll-out of the Initiative was cut after the trial, owing to ‘budget’ concerns (Garg, 2017). Hence, although various programs exist to assist teachers in accessing resources and teaching support, such programs are largely undermined by the reluctance of governmental funding, reflecting the fundamentally flawed nature of the CCP policies and presents detrimental inconsistencies in Australian sustainability education. Inevitably, this evokes negative consequences for the empowerment of Australian students in contributing towards SDGs.

Teacher disempowerment, evident in the largely ineffective delivery of sustainability education, triggers direct negative consequences upon Australian students, who endure the second tier of social disempowerment. This is largely due to the significance of the school classroom as a social context that influences development, wherein the majority of Australian students spend the predominance of their time (Henry et al., 2000, p 61). As noted by White & Wyn, the specificity of ‘self’ and identity is shaped not only by global features, ‘but also by the mundane experiences of family friends, neighbourhood, school and community,’ demonstrating the influence of contexts like the classroom in developing norms and behaviours (Wyn & White, 2008).

Although young people ‘express reasonabl[y] high levels of concern for the environment,’ particularly in light of recent school climate strikes, studies equally indicate that many young people are resigned to feelings of disempowerment regarding the negative consequences of climate change (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 65). Thus, the predominance of youth disempowerment ought to be considered as a practiced social norm which gains legitimacy within influential social contexts such as school systems, wherein resignation to the facts of climate change appears to be palpable. This is particularly concerning given that certain behavioural change is considered mandatory in order to live more sustainably (Wicker & Becken, 2013, p. 42). Therefore, classroom settings that validate negative attitudes towards sustainability prevent successful youth

engagement by inhibiting positive behavioural change and norms.

In a similar capacity to that of teacher resources, students have limited access to external organisations which facilitate the encouragement of sustainable practices amongst youth, such as Millennial Kids, Oaktree and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. Although formal education is an essential tool to achieve sustainability by shaping behaviours and attitudes, Wilson states that 'formal education is only one means to encourage sustainability, and cannot carry the sole responsibility for people's learning of sustainability' (Wilson, 2012, p. 44). Many school teachers have fostered pedagogical partnerships with such external organisations and communities to encourage engagement with sustainability initiatives, which have been strategically incorporated into the learning experiences of students (Green & Somerville, 2015, p. 839). Thus, it is possible for young people to find empowerment within extracurricular involvement with sustainable organisations, should they acquire the support of their parents and communities. The recent school climate strikes alone demonstrate the capacity for Australian students to be empowered through external communications. However, the fact resurfaces once again that this level of engagement relies upon the values and beliefs of individual teachers, students and parents rather than systematic support.

Another problem is that, as shown by a recent survey published by the journal 'Global Environment Change', one in five Australians do not believe in climate change, giving Australia the highest percentage in the world of climate sceptics (Tranter & Booth, 2015). This is merely one example demonstrating the general context of apathy within Australian society towards climate change. Therefore, positive prospects for changes in behaviour through engagement with external organisations alone does not appear plausible in a systematic capacity.

Hence, it is apparent that, despite the efforts of individual teachers and parents with special interest in sustainability, education practices cannot be emancipated from Australian political agendas and policies which undermine prospects for holistic sustainability education. This ensures that the cycle of environmental crime is normalised and sustained, as students lack awareness of, and access to, information detailing the structural and systemic roots of environmental problems (Schild, 2016, p. 31). Thus, because of students' lack of individual autonomy, social norms encouraging apathy towards climate change are actively sustained through political influence to capitalise on the business-as-usual commodification of nature.

Recommendations and Future Work

Despite the overwhelmingly negative outlook in the Australian context regarding sustainability education and youth engagement with SDGs, a list of three recommendations have been collated which details plausible actions that could be undertaken to improve this outlook. These recommendations are listed in order of scale (from the smallest scale at number 1 to the largest at number 3), with 2 being the most plausible option to encourage effective youth empowerment and engagement.

- I. *Increased awareness of SDGs in Australian classrooms through basic means, including visual representation such as posters.*

Particularly in Australian primary schools, visual representations of knowledge, such as posters, would benefit students in learning the purpose and global requirements for SDGs. Cognitive science supports the use of posters in the classroom, with a multitude of research finding that visualisation is an effective tool to foster student learning (Yale Poorvu Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2016). Sparking this initial conversation with the visual assistance of posters and encouraging student community participation through relevant coursework may then promote positive engagement with SDGs. This could be through educational projects in secondary education such as the SACE Research Project, in which students are given opportunities to engage with external organisations, persons and communities that promote sustainability. Whilst this recommendation may face the previously-addressed obstacle of the lack of sustainability training for teachers, the recommendation would prove effective in contexts wherein teachers do possess a minimal level of prior knowledge. Additionally, it is a simplistic initiation to broader concepts which may be pursued by students in relevant coursework after introduction to the SDGs through visual aid.

- II. *Increased sustainability-focused extracurricular activities, wherein broader scope for such opportunities is evident over that of regular classroom learning.*

This is a recommendation already being practiced by various Australian schools throughout Victoria and New South Wales in particular. Given that extracurricular staff are legally required to be compensated for preparation hours in the organisation of after-school activities, this recommendation is realistic and effective in working towards the normalisation of sustainability in schools. To note one successful example, school staff are able to gain

access to the ResourceSmart Schools program through online portals that help after school care workers introduce activities which promote and normalise sustainability (ResourceSmart Schools, 2019). Moreover, successful frameworks within Australia indicate an ability to strengthen community ties and encourage localised action efforts, thus promoting social sustainability. Adopting a bottom-up approach through schools and increased community participation is vital for children to learn about the significance of SDGs and become empowered to shift business-as-usual norms. Although policy change is ultimately required to initiate large-scale change, a bottom-up approach is a necessary avenue to pursue now.

III. Increased pressure from staff and students to acquire meaningful governmental support in the 'sustainability' CCP.

Increased pressure may be generated through continued school climate strikes, organised teaching strikes, petitions, interschool collaboration and formalised meetings to strategise means of plausible institutional transformation of the CCPs. Policy review of the CCPs must be prioritised, and that the 'voluntary' nature of the CCPs must be replaced with 'compulsory' requirements including greater support to teachers to effectively teach the Sustainability CCP. Collective action from activist groups has proven effective in changing policies previously, from large scale change including the women's right to vote, to smaller scale environmental victories including the Franklin River blockade success led by The Wilderness Society in the 1970s. Furthermore, the recent School Strikes for Climate highlighted the strength in collective action, reflected by the participation of significant companies including Amazon, Etsy, and Lush, among many others. There are certainly drawbacks to this recommendation, which are illustrated throughout the paper, including budgetary restrictions upon, and the lack of knowledge possessed by, Australian teachers. However, as has also been acknowledged, there exists a number of Australian school teachers who have identified flaws in the CCPs and are eager to initiate change in order to make sustainability education more effective. Although this recommendation is large in scale, past instances of successful collective action indicate promising prospects for increased funding to support sustainability education in the future.

Conclusion

Presently, young people in Australian educational systems do not receive adequate support to feel empowered in engaging with SDGs, and sustainability more broadly.

This is a result of the large-scale systematic barriers of policy and politics which are sustained to economically and socially empower those already powerful through the commodification of nature, whilst simultaneously jeopardising the future prosperity of young people. This is identifiable within the Australian CCPs, which offer nothing further than a tokenistic gesture regarding sustainability education, given its voluntary nature and therein lack of accountability. The CCPs generates a two-tiered system of social disempowerment regarding sustainability education. The first tier is evident in the capacity that Australian school teachers are deprived of adequate training and education regarding effective delivery of sustainability education in classrooms. Consequently, the disempowerment of teachers triggers the disempowerment of young Australian students, who are unable to access means of comprehensive sustainability education owing to lack of autonomy. This exacerbates the current trend of negativity concerning sustainability and climate change within Australian schools and youth populations, with prospects for positive behaviour change into sustainable actions being undermined by the social norms produced by neoliberal political agendas evident in the CCPs. Thus, young Australians are deprived of adequate frameworks for empowerment and support within their educational institutions, preventing youth engagement and inhibiting societal progress in sustainability.

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