

CHAPTER

7

Future Directions



The purpose of this report is to raise the level of debate about education for sustainability, and to stimulate effective action so that New Zealanders can learn to live in sustainable ways (see section 1.3). It argues that a shift in perception and understanding is needed among many people and organisations in society, in the ways they look at issues and search for solutions, to enable a ‘sea change’ for the better.

Key points have already been summarised at the end of each chapter. To stimulate effective action, this chapter highlights areas that the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) believes require focus and action *now* to enable learning and education for sustainability. Suggestions for future research have also been highlighted.

7.1 Areas for focus

Quality of life

Education for sustainability needs to have a strong focus on the quality of life that people enjoy in communities across New Zealand. Because the vast majority of New Zealanders live in urban centres, it will be particularly important to ensure that urban dwellers can learn to live in sustainable ways.¹ As highlighted in chapters 2 and 6, New Zealand’s economy is currently material and energy intensive. New Zealanders have very large ecological footprints compared to most other developed countries. We are consuming more than our fair share of global resources, often in inefficient ways. New Zealanders can resolve these concerns and enjoy an excellent quality of life. To achieve this, it will be necessary to address some of the bigger questions about why ecological footprints in this country are so large.

Keeping an eye on the bigger picture

A major focus of environmental education efforts in New Zealand to date has been on encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their impact on the world around them. The focus has also tended to be on educating people to deal with the symptoms of sustainability problems like waste, instead of also empowering them to address the underlying reasons for these problems. Individual responsibility is an important part of education for sustainability. It is also helpful to manage the effects of undesirable activities. However, for transformations to occur, which will make it easier for people to live in sustainable ways, it is vital to keep an eye on the bigger picture of where problems are coming from. It will be essential to develop collective responsibility and a consensus for redesigning social and economic structures and institutions that perpetuate unsustainable practices.

Developing capacity

Environmental education in New Zealand has suffered from a lack of support. Many initiatives have only been successful because of the enthusiastic efforts of dedicated individuals. It is very likely that more successes could have been achieved if they had received more encouragement and assistance. It is essential to build on the achievements of environmental education efforts in New Zealand, and to develop the capacity across all sectors of society to engage with the broader concept of education for sustainability.

Learning across society

Significant changes are needed in the formal education system. However, major changes in society will not come about by changing this system alone. A vast amount of learning takes place outside of schools and tertiary education institutions. Young people need to be empowered to participate in decisions that affect them, but is it fair to encourage them to resolve unsustainable practices without encouraging adults to do the same? Many different approaches can be used to promote sustainability across society, although coordination of efforts is likely to be an ingredient for overall success.

Pursuing social marketing for sustainability

The government has conducted many advertising campaigns to motivate New Zealanders to act in various ways (see section 4.1). To date, social marketing has not been widely used to reach a bigger audience on sustainability issues. There are therefore significant opportunities in this area. It is important to acknowledge tensions between social marketing and education for sustainability. For example, social marketing often encourages people to act in certain ways without getting them to think very hard about why. In comparison, education for sustainability aims to empower people to think for themselves about unsustainable practices. Nonetheless, social marketing has a huge potential to complement education for sustainability. Some people may question the acceptability of using marketing approaches in this way. If so, it is useful to reflect on this question: why is it currently acceptable for marketers to shape needs and desires around products and brands, and to shift behaviours in the areas of drink-driving and smoking, but not to use these techniques to promote sustainability?

Being responsive to cultural diversity

New Zealand is already a culturally diverse country, and diversity is continuing to increase (see section 2.1). Education for sustainability needs to be responsive to the different cultural backgrounds of a diverse



population. It will also be essential to make stronger connections with tangata whenua perspectives on learning and education for sustainability.

7.2 Areas for action

**The warnings are there and the evidence is all around.
But the message is not getting through.² – Sir Peter Blake**

As chapter 3 highlighted, education for sustainability needs to be future-focused. It is also important to look for positive ideas for improvements. This section highlights key areas that the PCE believes require action *now* to ensure that education for sustainability can have an increasing influence on how New Zealanders organise their lives to enjoy a great quality of life. They have been grouped into various sectors – although it will be vital for all people and organisations to be encouraged to work towards a better future.

Local government

Public participation is a vital part of education for sustainability (see section 3.4). The new Local Government Act 2002 requires councils to work closely with their communities (see section 4.2). There are therefore major opportunities to improve public participation at a local government level. There needs to be a focus on building up capacity within councils, as well as out in the community, to ensure that adequate participation can take place.

Local government has led the way on many education initiatives in New Zealand (see section 4.2). Nonetheless, funding and support for education is still precarious in many councils. All councils should recognise the need for education to be a core part of their activities. Local government also needs to work with central government to ensure that education for sustainability and social marketing approaches are relevant to the different needs of communities throughout New Zealand.

Central government

Central government needs to see environmental and sustainability issues as a priority for education. Education also needs to be a core part of efforts to advance sustainable development in New Zealand. Progress in both these areas has been sorely lacking to date (see section 4.1). The government has made commitments in the international community to take a strategic approach to education for sustainability, and to integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels (see section 3.1). It needs to ensure that these commitments are fulfilled.

Key areas for government to focus on are in the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors (see below). The government also needs to look beyond the

formal education system, and to work with local government and other sectors of society to build up a mandate for changes needed for sustainability. Social marketing should be pursued to reach a wider audience on sustainability issues, as long as it is well researched, adequately funded and suitably developed. It is vital to ensure that messages from government departments to the general public and businesses are coordinated in a meaningful way. In addition, the government needs to take a more critical look at the content and quantity of advertising in New Zealand society (especially advertising that is targeted at children and young people) that may run counter to sustainability.

Primary and secondary schools

Environmental education has had a very rocky start in New Zealand schools. Education for sustainability has only recently come on to the agenda. The education of young people today has major implications for the future of New Zealand. For the vast majority of New Zealanders, environmental education has not been part of their learning in schools. Where environmental education has taken place, it has mostly focused on education 'in' and 'about' the environment (see section 4.3). This sort of education is essential for developing an ethic of caring towards other people and the environment. However, education for sustainability also requires people to address the underlying reasons for unsustainable practices.

It is essential to ensure that education for sustainability, including its environmental dimensions, has a strong presence in the primary and secondary school curriculum. Education for sustainability requires learning to be undertaken in a cross-curricula way (see section 3.4). The recent review of the curriculum has provided a timely opportunity to ensure that education for sustainability can be part of the formal education of every New Zealander. Other valuable initiatives, such as EnviroSchools and the recent development of Sustainable Futures classes, need further support. It will also be essential to ensure that there is adequate professional development for teachers to enable them to implement education for sustainability in schools.

Tertiary education

Tertiary graduates need to have a core understanding of sustainability embedded in their education. Tertiary education institutes therefore need to follow the lead of many other universities and institutions around the world by encouraging education for sustainability throughout their organisations (see section 4.4). They need to address the ways that knowledge is sliced up into many different disciplines and to support learning across boundaries, while still allowing subject specialists. As noted above, there is also a need for all teacher training institutes to build on the environmental education successes of some colleges of education in New Zealand.

Recent reforms of the tertiary sector have enabled government to have a greater influence on tertiary education in New Zealand. It is essential to extend the government's vision for this sector to give much more priority to environmental sustainability (see section 4.4). The government needs to work with the Tertiary Education Commission to ensure it is contributing to this goal.

Community organisations

Many community organisations and environmental NGOs have played a vital role in promoting environmental education in New Zealand. Although it is important to maintain an environmental focus, it will be vital to engage in the broader debate on education for sustainability. The focus of many education efforts to date has been on individual changes that people can make to reduce their environmental impacts. It is helpful to keep this focus. However, it is also essential to empower people and organisations to redesign some larger institutional and economic systems that shape the sustainability of New Zealand society. This will require a careful consideration of how all forms of community organisations can better be part of the sustainability learning process.

Businesses

A focus on businesses is essential for sustainable development. Proactive businesses in New Zealand are now giving much higher priority to sustainable development. Although these businesses are still in a minority in the business community, business people are showing a growing willingness to learn about sustainability and to question many of their own activities (see section 4.6). Business people need to be supported and encouraged in these efforts. However, it is also vital to keep challenging businesses. To maintain a 'licence to operate' in society, businesses will need to increasingly reflect on the values that are embedded in their organisations, and to question some underlying assumptions. They will also need to delve into some deeper issues, such as the role of many businesses in consumer societies (see chapter 6).

7.3 Suggestions for future research

There is much more research that needs to be done in New Zealand on education for sustainability, although this should not be taken as an excuse to stall changes in the meantime. Some areas for future research are listed below. The order does not imply any priority, and the lack of any recommendations about who could undertake research is deliberate. The intent is to generate interest in various areas and to inspire innovative approaches and, hopefully, partnerships for research.

Tangata whenua perspectives on education for sustainability

As highlighted in section 1.3, although this report has looked at learning across

society, it has not had a major focus on tangata whenua. It is likely that many close connections can be made with the principles of education for sustainability and tangata whenua perspectives on the environment. Further research is needed in this area, and should be conducted in a culturally appropriate way.

Local government capacity issues

As highlighted in section 4.2, there are a variety of capacity issues for local government in the area of education for sustainability. For example, councils with a small ratings base have often struggled to provide environmental education programmes. Local government also needs to develop capacities within their communities to encourage more active public participation in decision making. Research could look at ways to address some of these concerns.

Education for sustainability in the tertiary sector

Although there is much research on environmental education in New Zealand schools, the tertiary sector has not had the same degree of attention. This is a significant gap, because if tertiary graduates do not have a core understanding of sustainability then the pathway to a sustainable future will remain a side road for far longer than necessary (see section 4.4). Research could look at ways to improve the uptake of education for sustainability in tertiary institutes across New Zealand.

7.4 Future involvement by the PCE

The completion of this report does not signify the end of the PCE's involvement with education for sustainability in New Zealand. We will continue to monitor this area and welcome any comments you may have on education for sustainability and this report. We encourage you to contact us via email, at education@pce.govt.nz, or through the post at PO Box 10-241, Wellington.

In *Creating our future*, the Commissioner made a commitment to conduct another review of progress with sustainable development in 2006-07.³ Education is essential for sustainable development. The Commissioner has therefore decided that the 2006-07 review will include a re-examination of education for sustainability. The United Nations Decade of Sustainable Development will be underway by this time (see section 3.1). The Commissioner will follow up on the key areas identified above to see what actions have been taken.

Appendix: List of background papers

There is much more information on education for sustainability than we were able to squeeze into one report. Background papers have been produced to provide more detail in the following areas:

- 1: Summary of interviews
- 2: Government strategies related to education for sustainability
- 3: The structure of the tertiary education sector
- 4: Advertising controls in New Zealand

These papers can be downloaded free of charge from www.pce.govt.nz. Copies can also be requested by contacting us directly.