

## Families, Homes and Environmental Education

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### Abstract

The findings from a study of how Green families construct and practise versions of an environmental ethic and ecopolitic in the home are suggestive of how environmental education in schools might be revised. In this study, the green home proved to be a very different form of environmental education and practice of sustainability. Children's environmental learning was closely associated with their *doing* of practical things in the home in relation to the everyday environmental problematic. But this embodied, situated and practical *doing as learning* hinged upon their parents' environmental commitments and the family's functioning as they were respectively "structured"—materially, symbolically, geographically and historically by the social relations and conditions of the home, availability of resources, school and community networks, and prevailing cultural climate. Hence, this study of household ecologies, or *postmodern oikos*, provides evidence and insights for the further development of environmental education curricula and pedagogical strategies, understandings of a range of factors influencing learners' environmental engagement and action and, consequently, ecologically focussed research endeavours.

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Optimism or pessimism about the effectiveness of environmental education is likely to be misguided when the powerful domestic influences of families on children's environmental (dis)engagement are not considered in the curriculum development processes. Commonsense tells us that the mundane contexts of everyday home life embedded in family routines and habits, including parenting practices, life histories and functional relationships will significantly shape how the offspring, or children, respond to those educational interventions at school (or in the community) devised to increase environmental knowledge, change attitudes or modify specific behaviours.

Yet, despite the vast literatures on child development and socialisation, youth identities and their transitions, consumer/lifestyle culture and the entertainment industry, and so on, there are silences in the environmental education literature about how parents and families negotiate, construct and enact "pro" or "anti" environmental behaviours, or are indifferent to the environmental problematic. Little is known about the relationship of the availability or not of household resources and children's interest in, concern about or commitment to the environment. It is unclear how family arrangements and domestic conditions *situationally* shape what children *embody* and bring, as prior "knowledge" and "values", to environmental education programs in schools. Put differently, there is a paucity of information about how the home acts

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as a site of environmental education. We simply don't know how the family dynamic and its household milieu influences the learning, usually cognitive and social, that educators aim for at school, or in the community. We have relatively few insights into how household ecologies, or what can be called a postmodern *oikos*<sup>1</sup>, might be developed, or sustained. Juxtaposed with this lack of information about the ecological role of parents, homes and family functioning is a disturbing trend in Australia where concern for the environment has declined from 75% of households in 1992 to 62% in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

This study of Green families elaborates the idea of a household ecology by examining how the parents' environmental commitments and interests were passed down to their children. The subsequent impacts on the children's environmental learning are outlined below, but discussed in more detail elsewhere (Payne, in press). The findings reported here about the social construction of a *postmodern oikos* have the potential to disclose what might arguably be called "best family environmental practices". Theorising these practices might, in turn, inform curriculum and pedagogical development in ways that endorse, qualify or contest the mainstream aims and practices of environmental, health, citizenship, studies of society and environment, outdoor and sustainable education.

Since the 1960s numerous studies conducted overseas and in Australia have highlighted the relationship between parenting and pupil achievement at school. Indeed, the most important aspects of parental involvement are some of the subtle facets of parenting practices, such as style and expectations (Jeynes, 2004). "Positive parenting", it seems, may be far more influential than the school itself, although studies also show "over parenting" has negative effects on children's lives, including mental health problems, obsession and anxiety (Eastman, 2003). Clearly this is to be avoided, as most Green parents included in this study openly acknowledged (Payne, in press). Rarely, however, are environmental considerations incorporated into studies of families and parenting despite their prominence in the media over the past three decades and the mounting evidence of environmentally induced health problems. For example, the highly significant *Growing Up in Australia* report recently released by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2005) and its counterpart study of temperament (Prior, Sanson, Smart & Oberklaid, 2000) said little about the environment and its care, or responsibilities for it, even though the theme of civic responsibility was, at least, addressed in a related publication (da Silva, Sanson, Smart & Toumbourou, 2004).

The Australian environmental education literature on parenting practices, the functioning of families, or the influence of the household on children and young adults' views about, knowledge of, interest in, or commitment to the environment and nature is in a formative stage of development and only indirectly related to the idea and practices of a household ecology pursued here (for example, Hillcoat et al., 1998, Hampel, Holdsworth & Boldero, 1996; Kwan & Miles, 1998, Payne, 1998, Connell, Fien, Sykes & Yencken, 1998, A. Gough, 1999). Bentley, Fien and Neil's (2004) otherwise crucially important study of sustainable consumption and young Australians as agents of change paid limited attention to the role of parents, the changing nature of the family, and the commodification of the home (see also, Bennett, Emmison & Frow, 1999; Kenway & Bullen, 2001).

To be sure, in the international environmental education literature, "significant" and "formative" environmental experiences have been reported at length over a number of years (Tanner, 1980, Chawla, 1998, Palmer, 1998) and, more recently, keenly debated (S. Gough, 1999). Palmer, Suggate, Robottom & Hart's (1999) study of significant experiences included an Australian sample and provided some useful information about "close family", "older friends", "child" and "teenage" outdoor and nature experiences. The two decade long international research program on significant, formative experiences

is suggestive of the sometimes important role of parents and influence of the home, amongst a wide range of factors that might contribute to environmental activism. There is some other research in Australia on “intergenerational” factors. This line of inquiry, however, focuses on how the messages children take home from environmental education programs offered at school might modify communication with parents, add to their learning or change household activities (Ballantyne, Connell & Fien, 1998a, 1998b; Ballantyne, Fien & Packer, 2001a, 2001b). And, of course, numerous models of environmental behaviours developed in the social psychology of environmentalism touch directly or indirectly on the variable of the home, parents or family (Stern, 2000, Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) but rarely with the depth of insight needed by curriculum developers, teachers or researchers to undertake serious revisions about the ecological nature of teaching and learning experiences in schools.

### **The Purposes, Approach and Methods**

These gaps in the literature contribute to a lack of rich insights into how the home and family functioning shape the environmental learning of younger children. The conduct of this study was very mindful of an invigorating discussion in environmental education research about the quest for greater coherence between the purposes, design and methods, interpretation and representation of findings, and associated claims to the legitimacy, politics and outcomes of the research endeavour (Robottom & Hart, 1993, McKenzie, 2005).

The broad purpose of this study of household ecologies, as a *situated* rather than *contrived* in the school site of environmental education, was to identify and understand how Green families embodied, socially constructed and practiced, individually and collectively, their own domestic versions of environmental ethics and politics. Three interrelated research questions underpinned this interpretive study of the environmental *agencies* and sustainable *actions* of seven Green families living in inner city Melbourne.

First, what were the family members’ environmental practices? In other words, what environmental interests, commitments or concerns were enacted individually and collectively in the household? Second, in what ways did parents think about, pass down, negotiate and support the environmental actions (and inactions) of their children? Third, how did their children respond to, act upon, contest and resist their parents’ commitments and actions? In other words, what environmental ethic and ecopolitic was being constructed in the household, over time and according to changing family, social and cultural conditions?

A concerted effort was made in this study of household environmental *praxis* to explore, interpret, describe and explain the *in situ* environmental actions, inactions and mutual influences of family members. Less important was the parents’ and children’s environmental knowledge, attitudes or values. The action orientation of the study was, unfortunately, limited to using data obtained discursively from in-depth conversational interviews (Alvesson, 2002), a household inventory and surveys administered individually to each parent and child. Family ethnographies and family-member phenomenologies of household actions, interactions, associations, arrangements and communications were excluded from the research design due to privacy issues and constraints of university ethics committee approvals.

The seven families, totalling twelve adults and eleven children aged between the ages of 8 and 16, were studied in the latter half of 2004. These families lived in the northern part of inner city Melbourne where the vote for the Greens at the 2004 federal election was 18.5% (+2.73% from the previous election), a disproportionately high vote whose consequences for these parents affirmed their sense of belonging and

participating in an ecological community. Self-selecting parents were either registered members of the Greens party or voted/committed to the Greens. Each had at least one child aged between 8-16.

Individual conversational and “in-depth” interviews (Patton, 1990; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) were conducted with each parent, in their home, following a loose but semi-structured series of six open-ended questions. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. One parent from each family completed a 25 item demographic details/background and household inventory about appliances, other resources, vehicle ownership and their use, holiday locations in the previous year and bills. Each parent completed a 134 item survey that addressed the four practical “wisdoms” of energy, water, travel and waste, compiled from a wide variety of household conservation information sources, plus a fifth wisdom of “self” devised by the researcher. Each survey item used a four point scale to ascertain actual/real environmental actions and inactions. Very few items focussed directly on environmental knowledge or values, or beliefs and intentions, held by the respondent. Each of the five “wisdoms” items were scored numerically to identify and compare different levels of practical actions. The five scores were also aggregated to provide an overall indicator of a respondent’s environmental praxis.

The children’s interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The survey was shortened and simplified to 92 items. Analysis and interpretation of the data followed a similar procedure to that outlined above.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher, transcribed by a research assistant, discussed at length with the research assistant, listened to again by the researcher while reducing the transcript data to an extended summary. The summary of each interviewee’s “voice” included a logical reorganisation of some of the data given the, at times, fragmented nature of the conversational interview. The researcher then constructed an individual narrative which incorporated demographic background details, highly relevant aspects of the household inventory and responses to the survey. The narrative was then returned to each parent with an invitation to discuss, change, add to or delete any of the information contained in the researcher’s text.

The individual narratives were reinterpreted by the researcher in a “phronetic” manner (Flyvbjerg, 2001) consistent with a “grounded theory” approach to the representation of research findings and insights emerging inductively from the narrative. Coding for “conceptual indicators” (Strauss, 1987) of “little things” that “make social science matter” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 129) provided a basis for clusters of meaning to emerge that formed a more definite theme or category of findings.

The emergent thematic structure of each parent’s narrative differed, as it did for the children. The “constant comparative” (Strauss, 1987) approach was used to reinterpret data so that general findings about the samples of parents or children might thematically occur. These are summarised below and assist the task of representing and communicating the findings, noting the overlap between many of the categories and acknowledging differences within categories.

For the purposes of this research and in response to the first two research questions listed above, in particular the construction of a household ecology through parenting practices and family functioning, each of the individual narratives were also combined into a family narrative. Extracts of a family narrative appear below in an attempt to representationally make aspects of the *oikos* “live”. The construction of the family narratives followed a similar inductive and (discursively) “grounded” procedure as that outlined above, including the “triangulation” and aggregation of each parents’ and child’s narratives while incorporating the related contextual information about

demographic backgrounds, household inventory and consistencies or differences of family member's environmental praxis.

Importantly for methodologically inclined readers, the fundamental problems of equating context and text, experience and language, lifeworld and its textualisation are acknowledged as a major limitation of any research. This problem of interpreting and representing human and family agency and its/their *praxis* are exacerbated further when any aspirations this researcher might have to clarify the *ecocentric* ideal of a household *oikos* are immediately compromised by the inherent anthropocentrism of language, the word and the texts authors produce (Payne, 2005).

Brief mention must therefore be made of this researcher's interpretive stance to the research planning, design, conduct and textual representation of the inquiry (for example, Archer, 2000, Alvesson, 2002, Grbich, 2004, Law, 2004, McKenzie, 2005). "Empathy and experience" (Payne, 2005) of the researcher and the researched, and the subject of the inquiry (ie. household ecologies) sum up the interpretive stance knowingly adopted. Like a number in the sample, I am a male, 50 year old, married, father of one eighteen year old daughter. I lived in inner city Melbourne at the time of the study but mainly reside in a rural Mandurang (Bendigo) property of 3ha. abutting a recently designated National Park, in a home that is nearly self-sufficient in water supply and waste. Like many in the sample, I hold a doctoral degree, but in environmental and education philosophy, work as an academic with a keen interest and extensive background in environmental education and research planning and methodology. Like the majority of parents, I am a member of the Greens with "political" and activist experiences in a range of local environmental, social and educational issues.

In summary, the way in which this interpretive study of a *postmodern oikos* was conceived and conducted provided the (discursively and textually) limited possibility of tracking families over three generations so as to appreciate the unfolding character and evolutionary development, or not, of their enacting an environmental ethic in the home, according to prevailing circumstances but changing family, social and cultural conditions and contexts. Central, therefore, to the researcher's purposes, processes of inquiry and interpretation of the data was the socio-ontological importance of emphatically incorporating time and place considerations into the embodied and embedded realities of family life as they were shaped by the material, social, historical and symbolic realities experienced in the home (Payne, 1997, 1999, 2005).

## Findings and Discussion

Characterised below are ten clusters of meaning derived from the study about the parents, their individual histories, influences, expectations, relationships, work experiences and family aspirations:

- family backgrounds and memories of parents, home, related childhood events, places and relationships in the late 1940s and 1950s;
- memories of their own identity formations and transitions as youth and as young adults;
- understandings of how education in the mid 1960s to mid 1970s formalised or challenged their own self, social and political understandings, lifestyle assumptions and commitments, and social expectations;
- early career expectations, mixing travel and attempts to explore a professional identity;
- emergence or consolidation of a personal politic, including interest, key events and concern for the environment or nature;
- partner selection and identity renegotiation and collective reconstruction;

- evolving and current family dynamics, work/household leisure patterns and functioning household ecology;
- pursuit or availability of household resources, satisfaction of material needs and consumption, environmental actions and inactions, environmental wisdoms;
- parenting strategies, practices and identity transferral to children; and
- household geographies and “communities” of “like-minded”, family lifestyle practices and place or nature relations, including choices of schooling for children.

The clusters emerging from their children’s data included:

- formative experiences including children’s practical uptake, rehearsal, or resistance to parenting (environmental) practices and household dynamic;
- access to and use of household resources and effects on environmental actions, inactions and wisdoms;
- responses to schooling in accordance with the environmental functioning of the home and related expectations or interests of their parents; and
- their ability to negotiate environmental interests with their peers.

For the limited purposes of this article, only the clusters of meanings surrounding the “evolving and current family dynamics, work patterns and functioning household ecology” and “parenting strategies, practices and identity transferral to children” are discussed. Other categories found are alluded to. The selection of the two clusters relates primarily to a major rationale of the study—the lessons curriculum developers might learn from the ways Green families foster a domestic ecopolitic. These lessons are offered in the conclusion.

A side note is important at this point. In considering the future pedagogical possibility that Green families might provide a version of “best” environmental practices, it is crucially important to acknowledge that there are different assumptions, beliefs and values about what constitutes “good” parenting practices, not only in Australia but, surely, in other cultures. Indeed, good environmental outcomes in a family, or with children, might involve “bad” parenting practices. Clearly, curriculum developers who see the value of incorporating understandings of the family into what teachers might do “best” at school must be cautious about simply translating certain parenting practices into a revised version of, or approach to environmental education. Clearly, comparative studies of different household ecologies are needed to expose what might be learned from each other, in different situations, circumstances and contexts.

That said about the difficulty of claiming “best” practices on the basis of this particular study, to assist the reader in deliberating about such a delicate and controversial task *for the environment* (for example, Jickling & Spork, 1998, Fien, 2000), the findings relating to the cluster of meaning surrounding “parenting strategies, practices and identity transferral to children” can be characterised as – loving, caring and protective, primarily “liberal” and “democratic” in that a wide range of “methods” were employed including modelling, active demonstration, often allowing children the “freedom” to *do*, provision of choices—sometimes restrained, high levels of communication and use of reason, family discussions, principled problem-solving, and offering of explanations when asked. Persuasion was sometimes used by most parents, as was the sporadic use of manipulation, rewards and punishments for certain behaviours. Coercion was rejected. Direct instruction was rarely used but may have accompanied the explanations parents did offer. Most parents aimed to foster appropriate habits, following their own modelling and explanations of what they believed to be environmentally responsible. In general, the strategies employed by parents were primarily “child centred”, but negotiated when parents perceived a need, rarely coercive or “behavioral”, aiming for their offspring’s “empowerment” and “self determination” but clearly with a heightened

sense of environmental and social “responsibility”.<sup>2</sup> The majority of Green parents were acutely aware of their own differences, the “difference” and, therefore, many of the difficulties their children encountered. For the most part, the children sensed, understood and appreciated their own and parents’ difference (Payne, in press).

Both parents in each family studied were “united” in their ecopolitical approach to parenting but, most confessed, not on other matters, such as schooling, peers, friends and various social and cultural pressures their children were confronting. The consistency and overall management of the environmental education in the home was enacted more systematically by the mother, often in domestically related activities such as the selection and purchasing of (organic) food and its preparation as meals, low consumerism approach to buying clothes, and negotiation and “compliance” with energy, water and waste saving “wisdoms” or “rules” that had been established by the family. Fathers involved themselves more in appreciative outside activities such as bike riding in a park, playing with children on holidays and “backing up” the mothers’ construction of *oikos* and, possibly, “balancing” the potential for conflict arising out of the mother’s “governing” role in the domestic sphere. Fathers tended to act in a “surveillance” or “supervisory” manner.

#### *Family Dynamics and Functioning and Household Ecologies*

The twelve Anglo-Saxon parents were aged between 43 and 53 (one at low 30s) and were highly educated; the majority with postgraduate qualifications in law, medicine, physiotherapy, sociology, psychology, architecture, music, ecology, botany, education, European studies and politics. Five of the families were traditional and nuclear with one of those “blended”. Two families were “single-mother”. Four families had two children; three families had a single child. Most families had deliberately delayed having children until the mother was in her mid to late 30s. This allowed them to pursue postgraduate studies, in some cases embark on careers often involving social and/or environmental activism and overseas travel, accumulate life experience and, on their own reflections, be better and wiser parents. Most admitted to having “front line” activist or organisational experience in a wide range of environmental issues and campaigns in the 70s and 80s, such as the forests and rivers in Tasmania and Gippsland, uranium mining, the proposal to introduce powerlines in inner city Melbourne and development issues in Westernport Bay. Numerous sites of involvement and varieties of activism were mentioned.

All mothers worked either part-time or in a volunteer capacity. One father worked part-time; the remainder full-time. Decisions to work part-time were shared and, mostly, based on the “traditional” conviction that one parent was needed full time in the home to raise the children. Those working were in the professions with most admitting they were earning far less than their potential had they earnestly pursued a career, as they observed many of their friends or colleagues had. In most cases, this decision was driven by the view that family was a priority and wish to not comply with a consumerist, materialistic or capitalist “way of life”. In some instances, mothers chose not to work full-time because they also wanted to remain active in community and environmental issues, often as a volunteer. Most mothers expressed concern about their “waning” activism (social and environmental) due to child and family demands. Domestic activism in the home tended to replace past “front-line” social and environmental activism. Mothers, in particular, consistently “networked” with like-minded mothers and already well established friends to co-operatively extend the exposure of their children to others, as well as share or recycle resources amongst themselves to offset costs.

Most mothers and fathers had been raised in a large city and freely chose to now live in inner city Melbourne. It offered them a lifestyle, social and political opportunities for “community” affiliations and identity maintenance consistent with their environmental commitments, such as riding bikes to work, catching public transport, and greater access to “alternative” shopping for organic foods, second-hand clothing, and in two instances a Steiner school for their children.

Five houses were owned, or being paid off, with two rented. Most houses were old, as might be expected in an inner city suburb, had a well worn rather than immaculate appearance, were comfortable, sometimes rustic, and displayed a “lived in” blend of tidiness and untidiness. The owners of the one new house, self-designed and solar, managed to find space for a fruit tree on their small lot because they considered it very important for their two children. This mother had grown up in London on a property that included a market garden. Post-WW2, her family were beneficiaries of food vouchers and relied a great deal on the market garden for survival but which was fondly remembered as organic and nutritious. Most backyards and gardens were unkempt with some effort devoted in only a few homes to maintaining a vegetable garden or small fruit orchard. Space was limited. Books were well in evidence in all homes, probably reflecting the high education levels of the parents and their expectations or aspirations for their children. The majority of parents wished to install solar heating in their home but found the costs prohibitive. All parents were very aware of problems of energy efficiency in their homes, acknowledging a contradiction in their espoused beliefs and lived actions. Most families owned one car, usually a number of years old, and made conscious efforts to not use it. Holidays, usually local in Victoria, were the exception. Most households had relatively few “convenience” appliances. Where they owned computers or televisions, parents, particularly the mother, were fairly “strict” but negotiated rules about their (limited) use by the children. In one instance, a family had purchased a bread maker because they estimated 200 plastic bags could be saved in a year by not buying from the local shop. All children walked, cycled or caught public transport to school. School lunches were prepared at home as most parents were unhappy with the fatty or sugary menu at the school canteen. Most mothers and some fathers were actively or indirectly involved with their children’s school. Parents encouraged children to bring friends home, or visit. A number of children were learning a musical instrument; some played competitive sport.

The household ecologies of these green families and their sense of self-identity as “different” to most families they knew or were aware of can be clarified further. There is considerable evidence in this study that green parents’ social ethics, politics and austere living practices were significantly influenced by their own parents, few of whom were educated, most of whom were “working class” and who raised the current parents in a humble and resourceful manner. Word limitations prevent any detailed explanation of this related finding. However, it is worth pointing out that the current cohort of green parents did not naively reproduce their own parents austere practices but have consciously reconstituted and “re-traditionalised” them (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Berger, 2002) in an environmental direction, giving rise to much of the socio-environmental ethic and ecopraxis found here in the *postmodern oikos*. A strong but “evolutionary” sense and practice of intergenerational continuity was clearly in evidence.

Due to their university studies in the “heady” days of the late 1960s and early 70s, but also due to some resistance to their parents “ways”, these Green parents had strong convictions, sense of agency and participatory practices about a range of social and political matters. This agency metamorphosed over time and place according to changing cultural conditions and the circumstances they chose, or found themselves in,



including employment decisions at salaries far less than what they might have earned. A number of these parents still wish for things like solar heating, a digital camera, refurbishments to the house to make it more efficient. Their evolving politic invariably blended social and environmental activism and domestic politics. Parents “lived” their ethics, accordingly in the home and in other sites but “differently” to other families. At times they have struggled to maintain the level of activism they desired, mothers in particular, but have jointly parented in “liberal” and “democratic” ways within their construction of a household ecology and about which the vast majority of their children expressed strong but qualified endorsement.

In general terms, therefore, the inner city Melbourne green household ecologies varied considerably from the “norm”. These families viewed themselves as “different”. This sense of difference incorporated how they understood their own children, how they supported and “coached” those children who at the ages of 8-16 also understood their own differences, positively affirmed or celebrated their parents’ differences and relied upon them to help negotiate the peer group pressures they felt (Payne, in press).

### *A Family Narrative and Indicators of a Postmodern Oikos*

Extracts from one of the “family narratives” reconstructed from the individual narratives *indicate* many of the green identity “differences” and associated “learning” outlined above in the conceptual cluster of meaning surrounding “family functioning, dynamics and household ecologies”.

Jan is 55 years old and works part-time as a consultant in her own business. Tom is 51 and works three days/week in health services at a hospital. Ali is thirteen years old and in her first year of study at the local high school. Jan acknowledged that most of her friends have moved into senior positions and are “not as active as us in an environmental type lifestyle”. She concedes those friends have far more money but a lot less time to do various family and personal things. Tom and Jan’s decision to both work part time was formed by the values they shared and were committed to, including “allowing more time for us to discuss the minutiae of domestic life in political and environmental terms”. Jan admits she is the “organiser, social secretary and manager of the household” in “classic gender terms”. She believes Ali “sees me as an activist” and that “she sees us living our values, putting in submissions, sending cards of protest, donating to green organisations, going out demonstrating” and, in regard to Jan’s concerted efforts to influence the menu at Ali’s previous primary school “sometimes puts her in a difficult position”.

Jan, Tom and Ali spend a lot of time discussing their values and commitments. Jan is committed to “narrowing the gap between rhetoric and reality”. She is “very conscious of Ali picking up her and their inconsistencies between stated values and everyday practice”. Ali admits to being proud of her parents and the way they have raised her. She wants to carry on the environmental things “that mum has implanted in me, but not a career – something on the side”. She knows she and her family are different. “We don’t have TV, so they’re (her friends at school) talking about that and I say (to them) ... sorry we don’t have TV ...”. Ali added, “but I don’t want TV—get bored, ads are annoying and I don’t need it ... enjoy reading and other stuff and if we had TV I wouldn’t do it, get sucked into TV”. At school, Ali tries to laugh it off when they ask why she doesn’t have a TV —“... I just tell the truth—don’t want one – waste of time, don’t need it to have a good life.” She concluded, “... it doesn’t bother me much – gets a bit boring with people going on about it, but doesn’t upset me”.

Ali feels her mother's presence and her own differences in many ways that potentially might be difficult. "With mum being into recycling I take food to school in a recyclable container – that's a bit different – organic food – other kids note it, tried it and didn't like it – they say 'you've got weird food' ... but I like it so I'm fine". She admitted to "being more of a leader – sort of set my own rules" and "I think I'm a bit different – and don't mind that, I like it."

Ali said that "Dad's more light hearted and can laugh while Mum gets a bit serious sometimes. I sometimes feel nagged at, to do jobs, which I've usually done ... Dad isn't good at turning lights off – I try to do it a bit". But she goes on to confidently state, "Mum, like me, is concerned about asylum seekers. Mum's ideas on the environment are pretty big—I share her concern about the environment—the same—I get most of my ideas about the environment from her – she talks about it—with the food I take to school, taking re-useable bags—it's a whole family thing we always do".

Jan admits Ali "has to wear some flak from her peers" but that they talk about it a lot. Jan feels that "we've built a child with good self-esteem" and that "she is able to be different, she knows who she is, where she belongs, that she is highly valued, that she is far more confident than what I was at her age, she is articulate and able to argue her case". Jan also knows that Ali gets tired of being different and sometimes wants to be like other families but she likes being different and that is something she has now discovered.

Jan and Tom know that Ali will challenge them in the future. Jan added, "... and so she should which will be good for us and for her ... it's her job to grow away from us and we have huge confidence in what is inside her and will stay on". Ali already says things that, according to Jan, "sometimes make it harder with Tom as a couple ... triangles can be quite good, sometimes difficult but works very well in our house".

In the early years of Ali's life, Tom "re-parented" himself with Jan's support because of memories about the way he had been raised. In regard to environmental values and commitments, Tom acknowledged that Jan had similar views—"that being the easy part with no dissension". He felt that any differences lay in the intensity of Jan's commitment and that any "risk" to Ali from peer pressures and feeling different was diminished because of Ali's confidence and strength of character to keep doing things irrespective of other kids reactions. Tom also acknowledged that "Ali sometimes felt being different was tedious, sometimes annoying but at other times was interesting and uplifting ... but that her sense of self-worth was strong enough that she feels ok".

Tom regularly discussed peer group pressure with Ali, "... a great point which she sometimes reciprocates about what I bring home from work. We run the place like a co-operative'. Tom claimed that in their family discussions about what was influencing Ali's life "we often use the term 'in our family' to explain the position about the things 'we do our way' given the inevitability of us being seen to be different". Tom acknowledged "a degree of parochialness is fine but these are our values and are a positive difference". He conceded that it may be

difficult for Ali during adolescence, "... and that Ali is unimpressed when she sees other parents who are cruel or critical or unsupportive".

Ali felt she had made lots of friends in her first year at Secondary College and tried to keep in contact with friends from primary school. She was active at school and home in sport and music. Woodwork classes were a forum for developing new friends with whom she "talks about everything, about issues at school, including wasting water, recycling, whatever and I want to talk to a teacher who wastes a lot of paper".

## Conclusions

Strange as it might seem, another finding is introduced strategically in this conclusion because a) it identifies some lessons that might be learned by educators and b) it reveals a degree of political coherence and, hopefully, legitimacy between the purposes and the "grounds" of research. This finding about parental and child satisfaction with school provides direction for curriculum researchers and developers. Parents were pleased with two of the schools attended by their children because of the efforts made by a teacher, or the school in general, to develop or offer some aspects of an environmental education. One was a Steiner school; the other a primary school in which both parents had actively devised and participated in extra-curricula environmental education activities.

In general, however, the Green parents represented in this study were greatly concerned by what they perceived to be a low level of environmental education in schools. The parents were "understanding" of what they felt to be a fairly disappointing commitment from schools to the environment. Most conceded that government schools were limited in their capacity or ability to offer environmental education. Most parents now viewed environmental education as their own responsibility.

Ali's thoughts also say a great deal about what can be concluded from a thirteen-year-old's perspective. She felt there was "not much awareness of environmental things" at her school. Nevertheless, Tom was not overly concerned because he and Jan provided a focus they believed many other children would not be exposed to, either at home or at school. Jan, however, will not get involved in the Secondary College's canteen menu in the same way she did previously because of the effort and potential for Ali to be negatively effected. Ali continued to take her vegetarian lunch to school everyday in a recyclable container. Jan wanted the school to be "greener" but acknowledged it was "strapped for funds" so the environmental initiatives she wished could be introduced such as group walks or car pooling of children to school, installation of solar panels, the inclusion of environmental issues in the curriculum and better waste disposal, healthier food in the canteen and so on were unlikely. She concluded, "there is too much rhetoric" implying not enough action or *doing*.

Similar practical tips and solutions recommended by other green parents might, however, disguise the conclusions that can be offered about the processes of (potentially) "best" environmental parenting practices cautiously suggested above. Notwithstanding the controversial nature of "good" parenting, further deliberation is invited about incorporating aspects of the household ecologies found in this study into curriculum development in environmental, health, home economics, citizenship/democracy, social and gender education.

What, then, are some of the key visible and invisible pedagogical processes found in the *postmodern oikos* practised by these families? What lessons for curriculum developers are to be learned from the (green) household and its ecologies that

act as a *doing* and *praxical* site of environmental education? Are there some “best environmental parenting practices” that teachers might *do* in their classrooms and schools? For example:

- A commitment to environmental and social justice in both “theory” and “practice” where rhetoric is consistently matched by reality – an ecopraxis established communally, cooperatively, supportively and democratically with children;
- The normalisation, habituation and naturalisation of such an ecopraxis through the regular thematisation of the environment in the daily routines, actions and interactions and *doing* of family members;
- The view that *doing* as an approach to learning and child development rests upon the (re)cyclical nexus of “doing” (by family members), informing/explaining (by parents) and communicating (by all) and, hence, meshing of “real/direct/active/embodied” experiences and learning *for* the environment in those daily routines, family functioning and household ecologies;
- The development of trust, respect, support, care, reciprocity and mutualism in enabling children’s confidence and competence to be different about things environmental;
- The fostering of an ethos or culture that a positive difference can be made through one’s everyday actions and interactions, even through little things like, for example, making one’s own bread rather than “buying” hundreds of plastic bags in which bread is purchased from the shop;
- The willingness of parents to encourage resourcefulness in a range of domestic activities and interactions while limiting the availability or access of children to consumer/material goods, fashions, images and icons, and technological imperatives and, subsequently, children’s receptiveness to and acceptance of such “constraints”;
- The considerable financial savings and, therefore, economic benefits to families of constructing an ecopraxis;
- The realisation that a bodily, domestic, local ecopraxis is inherently political, powerful, highly accessible and easily enacted;
- Environmental and ecological knowledge are not crucially important aspects of an ecopraxis but a “consciousness”, awareness and sense of agency and resourceful and “lateral” power in “sustaining” it are; and
- Occasional appreciative contact with local and holiday versions of “nature” is of some value in the intergenerational ethic.

Even more generally, the findings provide further evidence that the ecology of the family (Brofenbrenner, 1979), be it traditional, blended or single parent, as were sampled in this study, remains a vital, if not crucial, component of curriculum inquiry, curriculum development and pedagogical enactment. Moreover, if environmental educators, and others, are to learn some lessons from this study then Lopez, Kreider and Caspe (2004) provide some useful direction. They identify five considerations that educators might embrace in “co-constructing” family involvement in a social and ecological direction. They are, responding to family interests and needs; engaging in dialogue with families; building on family funds of knowledge; training parents for leadership; and facilitating connections across children’s learning contexts.

In summary, the findings of this study of green households highlights the educative role of parents, the home and how household ecologies were constructed and maintained intergenerationally. There was something “different” in the way these families lived their lives, individually, socially and ecologically according to *doing* practical projects

in the home that make real or *authentic* learning sense about the quest for the *environment* and its *sustainability*.

**Keywords:** household ecology; families; intergenerational; environmental ethics; ecopolitics.

## Endnotes

1. The Greek noun *oikos*, meaning “home” or “household”, is the etymological basis of the term “ecology” (and economy). Combined with the root *logy*, meaning “the study of”, ecology is the study of the household, including the interdependent relations of household members and plants, animals and so on, hence “environmental house” or “place” (Odum, 1989).
2. The frequent use of inverted commas, referred to as “scare quotes”, in the above paragraph and remainder of the article is this author’s attempt to highlight the ambiguity of various key terms whose definitions, and debates about them, would take up an inordinate amount of textual space. In this paragraph, a practical *doing* concept of the abstracted, philosophical and political term “liberal” is indicated.

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