

## **Bourdieu and Education for Sustainable Development: analysis of an interview**

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This paper introduces the terms ‘environmental capital’ and ‘sustainable habitus’ as extensions of Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts that are considered valuable in contributing to a sociological understanding of our environmental crisis. Without more individuals possessing a sustainable habitus, the personal actions deemed necessary to achieve environmental sustainability might not occur. The role education can play in informing a sustainable habitus in students through the acquisition of environmental capital is investigated, with reference to semi-structured interview data drawn from a case study of an effective educator for sustainable development. The relationships between environmental capital and Bourdieu’s forms of capital are investigated within the context of the interview analysis. The interview is part of a larger data set produced in the context of a doctoral thesis. This paper demonstrates that the relevance of Bourdieu’s social theory has not been exhausted. Indeed, the application of his theory to environmental sustainability indicates that the full potential of Bourdieu may yet to be realised.

### **Introduction**

This paper is organised around two interrelated themes. The first involves a Bourdieuan account of our environmental crisis; the second discusses the implications of this account on the practices of education. The theory in this paper is interspersed with interview dialogue with an exceptional educator for sustainable development. This dialogue was generated through an interview with Amber\*, a teacher of prep students at a private primary school that has won various awards for sustainability, particularly due to Amber’s sustainable initiatives. This interview data was produced to complement data drawn from a case study at another school with a strong reputation for environmental initiatives.

Throughout this paper, the theory and the interview dialectically inform each other, with the intention of creating an idea of the praxis required for resolving our environmental crisis at the level of primary schooling. It is argued here that Bourdieu can assist in this, for his theory is ideal for investigating sustainability. The interrelated concepts of field, capital and habitus assist the understanding of how and why our environment is facing degradation and how this is connected to the particular cultural practices in which individuals engage. Bourdieu’s work exposes the mechanisms behind and within the reproductive tendencies of education, society and culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which, by extension, reproduce essentially unsustainable practices. Except for the dedicated educator that personally values Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), or

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\* Names have been changed to protect identity

the occasional school that mandates sustainable outcomes in its objectives, the practice of ESD runs far behind what the theory and the science suggest is necessary. For this reason, interviewing an exceptional educator for sustainable development is considered essential for moving the discussion from theory to practice. With this mission in mind, the presentation of the ideas, histories, practices and beliefs of such an educator is beneficial in providing practical understanding to other teachers caught in an outdated and potentially dangerous conception of schooling.

### **Sustainability and Bourdieu**

A common myth about our environmental crisis is that it resides ‘out there,’ and can be resolved by repairing nature. The more enlightened view considers various cultural practices to be responsible for ecological degradation, thus to resolve our crisis, culture needs to be repaired. In terms of Australia’s unsustainable culture, Amber said:

I think we've stepped over the edge of the precipice, and until a catastrophe happens, we won't get off our butts. Maybe when the cost of petrol is absolutely astronomical, we will start having sensible, 4 cylinder hybrid cars. - I don't think it's enough now cause I think we medicate ourselves to avoid the glaring light that's shining on us ... As in TV, entertainment, magazines, botox, coffee, catalogue spending - so I'm not overly optimistic, but I don't think the technofix is going to solve it all - there's got to be a huge mental shift as well.

Here, Amber discusses the deeply embedded cultural practices that are readily explained by Bourdieu. While Bowers (2001: 5) argues that the ‘downward trend in the viability of ecological systems is being disregarded by a public that wants to believe in the media and in shopping mall images of plenitude rather than consider the ecological consequences of their consumer lifestyle’, Bourdieu would add that:

to view action as the outcome of conscious calculation ... is to neglect the fact that, by virtue of the habitus, individuals are *already predisposed* to act in certain ways, pursue certain goals, avow certain tastes, and so on. (Bourdieu, 1991: 16, original emphasis)

Our unsustainable actions are then as much a form of ignorance and embodied cultural history as they are the result of rational calculation. An essential process to achieve sustainability will be the alteration of the habitus and Bourdieu enables us to theorise ways in which education can contribute to the production of a ‘sustainable habitus’ through the introduction and accumulation of ‘environmental capital’ (Karol & Gale, 2004). In short:

The transition to an ecologically sustainable society will involve a historically unprecedented revolution in institutions, systems, lifestyles and values. Much of Western culture has to be totally reversed in a few decades. We have to replace a long list of cultural traits by their opposites, particularly obsessions with material affluence, getting richer, competing, winning, exercising power and controlling nature. (Fien & Trainer, 1993: 39)

These cultural traits and practices, which Fien and Trainer observe as responsible for Western culture's unsustainable practices, correspond to Bourdieu's concept of practice, 'in accordance with the formula: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu, 1984: 101). While this formula was designed with particular cultural fields in mind, we can adjust this to account for the impact in our environmental supra field thus: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice with a +/- ecological result. The simplicity of this equation does not seek to presume that all practices are either sustainable or unsustainable, only that cultural practices cannot be isolated from nature, in that all practices impact upon ecology. What this equation does suggest is that the spaces to intervene for sustainable environmental practices are the habitus and cultural capital. While environmentalists argue 'that the root causes of environmental problems are located in the very nature of our current social, economic and political systems and in the world views, institutions and lifestyle choices that support them' (Fien, 1993b: vii), the majority of scientific responses are focused on nature alone, which serves to abdicate culture from its responsibility to make lifestyle changes, such as valuing a sustainable way of life. A sociological understanding of our environmental crisis indicates that the habitus as the locus of self and culture also needs to become sustainable.

Bourdieu's extensive theory contains many complementary conceptions of habitus (Bourdieu, 1979; 1990; 1993) that contribute different aspects or qualities of this embodied concept, though he never attempted a theoretical exposition of the habitus in its entirety. Thus, while the concept is difficult to pin down (Calhoun, 2003), it also maintains a certain fluidity that is useful for this sustainable rendition of Bourdieu's habitus. From his various writings, Bourdieu considered the habitus to be:

the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations ... a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 18)

The habitus is considered to be both of strategic importance and the culmination of history, knowledge, understanding, dispositions and skills that coordinates movement throughout fields. The habitus is an embodied form that continually evolves through a dialectic of cultural and personal construction, though Bourdieu maintains that the habitus remains marked by its earliest mode of acquisition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). Thus, the habitus acquired through family, schooling and class position tends to regulate the experiences and subsequent trajectory of the individual, 'because most people are statistically bound to

encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned the habitus' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 133). Hence, Bourdieu contends that individuals possess a constrained autonomy, and by virtue of available cultural, economic and social capital, will impose unconscious limits on themselves in a universe of possible choices 'because it [the habitus] acts within them as the organising principle of their actions' (Bourdieu, 1972: 18). Philosophically, the habitus is the ontological matrix from which only certain epistemological understandings can emerge. These understandings certainly influence actions, and the understandings themselves are informed and constrained by the nature of the individual's forms of capital.

While Amber is not discussing the Bourdieuan concept of environmental capital, she nevertheless introduces an important element of environmental capital, that being 'connection' or 'identification'. She considers that children are distanced from nature, and says:

I guess my identity and connection [with nature] is very strong when children who are in my care who I spend so much time with are actually vandalising my world, my identity, that branch. To me, cutting a scar on the Earth is like cutting a scar on me.

*There's a lovely quote from [environmentalists]: 'we're not protecting the rainforest, we're a part of the rainforest protecting itself'.*

Yes, we're a closed system, we're not a system that operates outside of the Earth, and now we're finding that out. Everything we do is impacting on our home, and the minerals and vitamins and everything and chemicals that make up the Earth are in us, so how can we deny that we're not part of it? Because we have this consciousness and language that gives voice to that consciousness, we think that we're somehow above it all.

Amber goes on to say that:

it would be my idea to put [the children] out into the yard, or into the mud patch and do our learning that way, to just let them 'be' and 'feel', cause children today are deprived of things that I in my childhood needed to experience, like getting across a dirty, smelly creek was a daily after school activity, with the local kids, the big kids, the scary kids, and with the smells too. I think the smells of earth and water and trees are just a richer way to experience life on this planet, and it's important to use all your senses to be in this world.

*Considering that we're 82 million years in evolution, and its only been the last 4000 years that we've lived like this, there's a lot of our unconscious memory residing outside.*

Definitely. And it's a survival mechanism and I think if we're more tuned in as we grow up and parent ourselves, then we're more likely to impart or give our children the opportunities to develop that side of them themselves...

Amber here discusses the importance of familial interaction in the formation of the habitus, and how important environmental capital is to the formation of what I call 'the sustainable habitus'. She emphasises the importance of connection to and identification with nature; a sustainable relationship with nature is distinctly lacking in Western cultures and Western schooling. Part of Amber's methodology involves the immersion within natural processes, with methods like 'tuning in exercises,' which involve silent listening, and later the representation of sounds, feelings and thoughts through artwork or writing. These activities serve to re-unite the children with their evolutionary heritage, and also provide a foundation from which values and subsequent actions may arise. Such pedagogical methods seek to alert students to the beauty and importance of their local ecosystems and surroundings, which is a key element of environmental capital.

### **Environmental capital**

In my view, environmental capital functions in the same way as Bourdieu's established theoretical notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1996). Cultural capital is Bourdieu's term for the embodied, institutionalised and objectified resources one has at their disposal and can draw upon to influence the outcome of exchanges in various fields. Bourdieu (1996: 5) says that 'one of the specific properties of cultural capital is that it exists in an embodied state in the form of schemata of perception and action, principles of vision and division, and mental structures'. Bourdieu appears to argue that cultural capital is the driving capital of the habitus, and he further contends that it is traditionally aligned with class division and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1979; 1986; 1991; 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). In all linguistic exchanges, one's cultural background and position is evident in patterns of speech, dress, qualifications and employment, interests and aspirations, and as such, all exchanges bear 'the traces of the social structure that it [cultural capital] both expresses and helps to reproduce' (Bourdieu, 1991: 2). Cultural capital informs one's relationship to society, culture and other individuals, and can be witnessed in various traits of character that receive different values depending on which field an individual is operating within. For example, the cultural capital, or knowledge, skills and possessions valued in rural communities may be less valued in urban centres, and so on.

While cultural capital mediates an individual's relationship to culture, environmental capital mediates an individual's relationship to our environment, mostly in terms of sustainability. Environmental capital represents the resources an individual has at their disposal to influence their impact on our environment. Thus, in the embodied sense environmental capital primarily entails knowledge about our environment. This knowledge ranges from the benefits of recycling to understanding the reasons for our environmental crisis. Such knowledge, therefore, involves to various degrees, an understanding of the interdependence of all life on Earth and an awareness of the complicity that individuals possess in contributing to both positive and negative environmental consequences. Thus, environmental capital also entails an understanding of the interconnectedness of the social, cultural, political and economic systems and the effects these have on our environment. This is so for two reasons. First, it is within these systems that sustainable initiatives must have their foundation. Second, knowledge of the root causes of environmental problems is essential for real progress towards sustainable solutions (Bowers, 2001; Fien, 1997; Hug, 1998).

Environmental capital in the embodied sense, therefore, involves various degrees of understanding of the individual's place in the world and personal complicity in our environmental situation. This could be represented as ranging from environmental ignorance or apathy in the less valued, or what is termed an 'unsustainable' sense, to environmental awareness and concern in the highly valued, or what is termed a 'sustainable' sense. Of course, environmental capital, as characterised mainly by knowledge and understanding of our environmental crisis is no guarantee of sustainable behaviour. Though, as elucidated below, sustainable environmental capital significantly informs a sustainable habitus, theorised as the essential manner of being engaged in the pursuit of ecological sustainability. As will become clear below, without more individuals possessing a sustainable habitus, the survival of humanity that depends on achieving sustainability may never be reached.

Wals (1990: 6, cited in Fien, 1993a: 71, original emphasis) notes that knowledge and understanding are 'not sufficient in resolving environmental problems. In order for people to be able to act upon their knowledge and awareness they need to become acquainted with a variety of *action skills*'. Sustainable environmental capital therefore includes various skills, or recognition of the need to develop and value various skills, such as those of ecological action (tree planting, recycling, green consumerism), analysis, communication, collaboration and cooperation (ability to discuss and seek consensus upon actions), deep thinking (engage in 'critical' analysis of self and society), decision-making (to ensure solutions are pursued), planning, and so on (Byrne, 2000: 49). Sustainable change relies on the individual understanding their position in our environmental crisis and then utilising certain action skills for sustainability. Environmental capital, however, is not simply comprised of a list of predetermined skills that can be acquired sequentially. More so, environmental capital

in the important sense of action involves an approach that considers the net ecological outcomes of actions. This said, environmental capital informs one's actions, rather than determines them.

Thus, unsustainable environmental capital could be recognised through a lack of awareness of our environmental crisis, a commodified conception of success and happiness, a propensity to purchase ecologically damaging consumer goods, such as polluting 'ornamental' 4WD's or processed, highly packaged disposable goods, an uncritical or unquestioning stance towards the unsustainable status quo and an unwillingness to engage in analysis of personal sustainability. Unsustainable environmental capital is essentially characterised by either an ignorant, apathetic or even deliberately damaging relationship with our environment.

In addition to embodied knowledge, understanding and an ecologically sensitive approach to actions, sustainable environmental capital exists in material or objective forms such as bicycles, solar panelling or recycled materials, and can be institutionalised via educational qualifications or employment positions in fields that have as a focus a sustainable environment. Unsustainable environmental capital, however, could be recognised through purchases or possession of goods or services that have excessive embodied energy, or products made through unsustainable means, such as one's clothing, consumer items such as unnecessary white goods or extra motor vehicles, or possessions of general extravagance. Unsustainable environmental capital can also be institutionalised through educational qualifications or employment positions in fields that have an exploitive position towards our environment, like mining, timberwork, fashion or property development. However, individuals who possess sustainable environmental capital that work in such exploitive fields may serve to alter the culture or ecological responsibility of the industry, thus lightening the ecological footprint wherever they are employed.

The degree of sustainability that characterises environmental capital can be further recognised from an individual's disposition to utilise available time to either engage in sustainable initiatives, enjoy nature in a sustainable and responsible manner, or to shop, engage in fuel-dependent activities, or frequent establishments with poor environmental standards, such as certain fast-food restaurants or clothing outlets. In this way, environmental capital can be recognised in a similar way to cultural capital. An individual's cultural capital could be recognised by the furnishings of his house, the form of her employment, or his preference for entertainment. Considering this, both cultural and environmental capital influence the way one lives. For just as a deficit of cultural capital can disqualify an individual from participating in certain cultural activities, a deficit of environmental capital can limit an individual's opportunity to engage in sustainable activities. For this reason, sustainable environmental capital is a pre-requisite for the constitution of a sustainable habitus.

Below, Amber illustrates how the perception of the cultural world can change with the accumulation of environmental capital, as she says she only puts her:

bins out once every three weeks cause that's all the rubbish I make, cause I made a commitment to worm farm and compost, and grow my own vegies - simple, little things, and this means my impact on the Earth, getting back to eco-foot printing - actually, that's a really important thing for everyone, every child going to school to know what their eco-footprint is in the community they live in, I think that's a really easy measure for people - 'I'm a 3.2 or a 4.8 - gosh, I'm a 7.2' That's being pushed in high school - where do the things I consume come from? How many Earth's does it take to resource the things that I consume?

If everyone in the world lived like Australians do, we would need 5.3 Earths to sustain us, though such considerations are not intrinsic within cultural capital, dominant or otherwise. A Bourdieuan perspective on our environmental crisis shows us that the cultural distinction aligned with traditional cultural capital accumulation is most often achieved through consumerism (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As Bourdieu (1979: 114) says, those who 'originate from the dominant class ... receive and consume a large quantity of both material and cultural goods'. At heart, the crisis of sustainability is perhaps a crisis of materialist consumerism (Bowers, 2003; McLaren, 1997). Environmental capital too is concerned with consumerism, though the consideration changes from what *form* is consumed to the *embodied energy or the materials* of what is consumed. For instance, the dominant cultural capital values luxury items like diamonds and gold, yet the extractive processes for such items of vanity causes irreversible destruction to nature, through habitat degradation and pollution. Similarly, education is a cultural activity that also leaves an ecological footprint. Schooling can produce pollution in the form of graduates who unwittingly destroy nature in the pursuit of cultural wants. Unless the school provides a culture of environmentalism, the students will rarely question the *doxa* (taken-for-granted constructed version of reality) paraded by those with dominant cultural capital. Thus, without a teacher presenting a sustainable version of reality through education towards environmental capital, the students' *habitus* may never become sustainable.

### **Education towards sustainability**

Bourdieu provides hope for influencing the *habitus*, when he writes that 'only the concept of pedagogic work can break the circle in which one is trapped when one forgets that a "cultural need" is a cultivated need' (Bourdieu, 1977: 38). Thus the *habitus* is constructed or 'cultivated' and it is then amenable to reconstruction or recultivation. It is in this context that I argue that a sustainable *habitus* is cognisant of the difference



between a 'need' and a 'cultivated need', that it is aware of the unsustainable practices used in the production of many 'cultivated needs' and so converts available economic capital with sustainability in mind. Such a reorientation of consumer habits is one of the essential elements for sustainability to be realised (Kennedy, 1994; Suzuki, 1990). Education for sustainable development should also cultivate within students the 'need' to live sustainably (i.e. a sustainable habitus).

Amber says of her beginnings in education that:

I had a mentor - who taught in that way herself and always intrinsically wanted to connect children with nature. She found that disturbed children or children she couldn't engage inside, that if you took them outside and did the same activity outside there was an immediate engagement ... And, it also echoed my childhood, where I was immersed in the outdoor world, and always out with dad in the garden or on family camping holidays, always playing in a big creek at the foothills of the Dandenong's, inventing and imagining, so there was a personal connection that I also saw in the work scenario as well, and it just flowed for me.

For sustainability to become a dominant part of family life, many changes are required in education, in cultures and the materialist doxa of our society. As Suzuki suggests, 'in the long run, the only way we can get off our destructive path is to develop a radically different perspective on our place in nature' (Suzuki, 1990: 183) and an important process to realising such change is education (Bowers, 2003; Kennedy, 1994). In pursuit of this sustainable reorientation, perhaps the most essential educational consideration is the context of learning. Amber continually emphasises the essentialness of space, of nature and thus of context to the education and future values of the child, indeed, the experiences of Amber's youth inform her teaching activities today. With creating similar experiences in mind, she has developed in the schools where she has taught a 'sensory walkway' which:

is an area that links either an outdoor space to an indoor space, or takes advantage of some overhanging trees, or walks children around a corner to a lunch area or teaching area, so there's a 'sense of place' about that area already and a magical and an intrinsically sensory and special 'hide away from the world' childhood place to it. - and you can get the children to design it also and get their input, and then you assemble your materials, and resource them from second hand places or families or places in the community where you know things are going cheap or free, so you try and do it really cheaply, which is always more sustainable. And you put a variety of textures into the pathway,

and I usually construct them with old sleepers or that sort of thing and just devise a wandering winding off into sections where you put all these different textures like rocks, pebbles, bark, river sand, cut off saw logs, old paving grit, scree, florae, anything that feels different that's going to stimulate children when they walk on it with their feet or sit down and play with it, draw in it, etc ... And then of course, you can use it for Maths, you can use it for estimating, you can use it for singing games, you can use it for literacy, for numeracy, so it becomes actually an outdoor 'learnscape'. It is important to use the whole landscape and natural environment to teach the kids rather than just using the things bought from an educational catalogue...

The sensory walkway is a space designed to encourage a sense of place, a visual, scented and tactile area that encourages a feeling of closeness, of safety and an emotional association of self with nature where children can both hide and learn. This 'learnscape' provides a deeply contextual area for students to develop their sensibilities about themselves, about nature, and about their relationships with learning, schooling and each other. Such spaces are invaluable in creating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as discussed below.

Importantly, care needs to ensure ESD is not conceived and practiced in the same atomistic manner that essentially undergirds the worldview responsible for our ecological crisis. While formal education plays an essential role in providing knowledge and understanding of cultural issues in Western societies, it is also often considered a critical process towards the resolution of social problems (Kennedy, 1994; Sterling, 1993). Implicit within all cultural problems is the state of our environment, though according to David Orr:

No other issue of politics, economics, and public policy will remain unaffected by the crisis of resources, population, climate change, species extinction, acid rain, deforestation, ozone depletion, and soil loss. Sustainability is about the terms and conditions of human survival, and yet we still educate at all levels as if no such crisis existed. (Orr, 2002: 83)

Within these comments are at least two assumptions. First, there is not enough education for sustainable development in schools, in teacher education or in general university courses (Gurova, 2002). Second, the type of education that is taking place is enforcing a fragmented world view, being single-disciplinary and uncritical of culture and society (Bonnett, 2004; Fien, 1997). Thus, the role of education in contributing both towards our environmental crisis and towards its resolution is evident through even a cursory analysis of formal schooling. While Australian students are often encouraged to recycle paper and clean their school grounds, they are also educated towards providing the human capital for a capitalist economy that necessarily strains both local and distant ecologies.

Bourdieu's account of the role of education in the reproduction of society and culture not only provides a powerful heuristic to understand the 'mechanics' of reproduction, but also assists in formulating a more universal and responsible pedagogical response in this, the United Nation's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Understanding the process of education and reproduction is essential when conceptualising methods for intervening and creating Education for Sustainable Development, for to conceive of desired future outcomes requires a deep understanding of the present (Bourdieu, 1998). The action that ESD requires is then not only creation, but also destruction of the elements of education that contribute to our environmental crisis. Unfortunately, ESD presently is more an addition to – rather than a condition of – the curriculum in primary schools. Amber, a committed environmentalist, considered the future of humankind and our planet some years ago, and said:

I wanted to get a lot more experience in environmental management and ecology, which I did, and I just became more passionate about it - and for my [Master's] thesis project I decided to develop an EC program for children based on ecological identity, drawing on ecology, environmental management, interactive teaching, counselling and my knowledge of child development ... My next step was looking for a school I could trial it in, and so here I am at [this school] doing just that.

While sustainability permeates much of Amber's teaching, in other schools this is rare for teachers are either lacking the knowledge or are effectively ignorant to how effective ESD is taught (Scott, 1996; Tilbury, 1992). Sterling (2001: 8) argues that this means much schooling 'simply reinforces practices and pathologies that cannot and should not be sustained over the long term'. Presently, few schools are actively challenging the status quo and presenting an environmentally responsible mandate for their curriculum. However, this reluctance to engage with ESD may not be due to apathy about our ecological future, but ignorance as to the unsustainable practices traditional education encourages.

Bourdieu assists in understanding the unconscious opposition to educational change that may subvert the current emphasis upon economic growth and class distinction, such as an invigoration of an environmental ideology. As *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) shows, education, society and culture tend towards conservative reproduction, or stasis, though Bourdieu believes that to 'speak of strategies of reproduction is not to say that the strategies through which dominants manifest their tendency to maintain the status quo are the result of rational calculation or even strategic intent' (Bourdieu, 1996: 272). According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1972; 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), it is the inculcated, durable, structured, generative, and transposable dispositions that constitute the habitus that are to large extent

responsible for the reproduction of culture, hence, the reproduction of our unsustainable society. Due to the nature of the habitus, which may have been shaped by a life history of unsustainable doxa such as the necessity of economic growth, that wealth is essential for happiness or that the environment is simply a resource and so on, the necessary decisions to contribute to environmental sustainability may not even be considered. Such doxa translates in schooling to an increasing emphasis on literacy, numeracy and technological literacy, and these are often taught in ecologically decontextualised classrooms without an explicit sense of utility and even more rarely with ecological sustainability in mind. This implicitly encourages students to identify with the cultural status quo rather than identify themselves with nature.

As Amber says:

Early Childhood was about literacy and numeracy, so there was a bit of tension there, but respectful tension. However, the school appreciate what I am doing, and now I've learnt to embed literacy and numeracy and document that within the ecological identity program, and of course the children now for two years have come out reading and writing and happy and loving learning and the parents are happy, and that's all a school can ask really.

Amber mentioned the concept of ecological identity a number of times throughout the interview:

Well, I believe we all have a powerful self-identity, and our ecological identity is a subset of that, like we have a sense of where we fit in space and time and how we're connected to the Earth, and to me that's what it is. I think it's probably our most fundamental human identity that we have ... There's ... the family identity, the self-identity, or the self-esteem, and then the ecological identity which is where I fit in the planet. So where I fit in the planet, where I fit in my family, where I fit in my self.

*There seems to be an opposing push towards creating more of an economic, cultural and almost a kind of national identity...*

No. This one's got to be strong and come first, and when that's really strong and formed, and robust identity, then the other one will be all the richer for it.

*Do you see that positive environmental behaviour coming through?*

Mother Nature's helper's, they call themselves.

In Amber's notion of ecological identity, the children are encouraged to recognise their interdependence with nature, thus strong ecological identity resonates with my conception of the sustainable habitus. The sustainable habitus, however, further embodies a commitment to contributing to a sustainable future.

### **The sustainable habitus and education**

A sustainable habitus refers to a habitus that interacts in ecologically sustainable ways with the Earth, and not to an unchanging habitus that is sustained immutably throughout its lifecycle. In this way, the terminology of 'sustainability' is being used in a similar way to the term 'sustainable development', in the sense that it uses the qualifier 'sustainable' to not only infer that development can potentially perpetuate itself ad infinitum, but also that development will not adversely affect the surrounding ecosystem upon which life relies.

'Sustainability' in this case, is not so much concerned with the perpetuation of development, but the perpetuation of life outside development. In the same way, 'sustainable habitus' jointly refers to a habitus, or a collective state of habitus', that can perpetuate itself biologically and ecologically until death, though more so, to a habitus that does not place undue strain on the surrounding ecosystem.

Bourdieu may say that the major obstacle to achieving sustainability, even though most individuals in late capitalist societies would be aware of our environmental crisis and summarily aware of its causes, is that 'the schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will' (Bourdieu, 1979: 466). The Western habitus, in particular, as the product of a modernist and often capitalist history is subject to a historical construction of unsustainable 'primary forms of classification', which despite 40 years of environmentalist theory and action, still unconsciously values an unsustainable orientation to nature. Importantly, Bourdieu maintains that:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal!  
(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 133, original emphasis)

I argue this to be the reason for the proliferation of the unsustainable habitus, hence our environmental crisis, because our political, economic, social, educational, cultural and natural or ecological experiences constantly affect the habitus in ways that reinforce its structures, i.e., the culture of neo-liberal capitalism. The systems of living that the habitus has effectively inherited are unsustainable primarily because they are reminiscent of

an era from which nature was considered boundless and endlessly replenishing (Suzuki, 2004), characterised and formed by:

Aggressive science, nature gendered as feminine, the attempt of technology to turn the whole of nature into a resource, the challenging quality of modern manufacturing and agriculture, the emphasis on consumption: arguably to an ever-increasing degree, such attitudes characterise the underlying motivational framework through which, as a culture, we understand and interact with the world around us. (Bonnett, 2004: 21)

However, given that the habitus is a construction (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993), it is then amenable to reconstruction. According to Webb et al. (2002: 58, emphasis added), the ‘habitus is made up of a number of ways of operating, and inclinations, values and rationales that are acquired from various formative contexts, such as the family, *the education system*, or class contexts’. Importantly for this research, the educational process does impact on an individual’s habitus, for ‘education is necessarily involved in initiating pupils into views of reality’ (Bonnett, 2004: 43), as Amber suggests above. If we then think of environmental capital accumulation through education as providing various schemata of environmental understandings to students, sustainable environmental capital then has the potential to inform a sustainable habitus, because:

A schema structures what a person knows of the world, by filtering out ‘irrelevancies’ and allowing sense to be made of partial information ... A repertoire of schemata contributes to the dispositions that make up habitus. As new experiences are gained, schemata are modified and developed and as they change so does what is recognised in the surrounding world. In this interactive way, the life history of the individual shapes and is shaped by his/her common sense experience. (Hodkinson, 1998: 97)

As discussed above, it is the dominant cultural capital distinctions maintained through the unsustainable production of cultural goods that is in part responsible for our environmental crisis, and therefore the capital that informs the habitus to engage in such consumption needs to change. For example, the prestige that comes from owning a luxury 4WD is a signifier of dominant cultural capital, though the embodied energy used in constructing the vehicle, the high emissions and poor fuel economy devalue this vehicle in ecological terms. Such vehicles are simply not sustainable, and the perceived prestige such consumer goods imply requires change. Kennedy (1994: 33) writes that the ‘human race as a whole could suffer more from a careless pursuit of economic growth than it may lose by modifying its present habits’. As Leitch (2003) argues that habits are synonymous with the inculcated, durable and structured dispositions of the habitus, it is through the accumulation of sustainable environmental capital one can become cognisant of unsustainable behaviour, and potentially adapt to a sustainable habitus. Anticipating this conflation of habitus with habits, however, Bourdieu went further and ‘said habitus so as *not* to say habit – that is, the generative (if not creative) capacity inscribed in the system of dispositions as an *art*, in the strongest sense of practical mastery’ (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992: 122, original emphasis). This means that without the generative possibility provided by sustainable environmental capital, the ‘art’ of living sustainably, essentially embodied in the creative capacity of the sustainable habitus, will not be realised. This said, the sustainable habitus is not a prescriptive or formulaic entity, but an evolving form which at its’ core values the ecological and ethical tenets of sustainability.

Amber says:

*I guess because I'm interested in role development and values development in young children and research shows that the first five years is where it all kicks off, especially four and five for moral development, that sense of right and wrong and this is unfair and ... you hear it in their play a lot, that's why I thought that this is the time to introduce this ecological sensibility to children, not when they're in Year 5 and they're already environmental vandals.*

Amber seeks to inform the primary habitus, the basis of any subsequent habitus development (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994) with the ecological sensibilities consistent with sustainability, such as a sense of morality about harming nature. Arguably, the lack of concern for the degradation of ecosystems is supported by the decontextualised nature of formal schooling, where children are unable to form the connection and identification with nature that would vehemently decry destruction like pollution and soil loss.

## **Conclusion**

Bourdieu is invaluable when considering sustainability because he provided an understanding of the ‘enculturated self’ as the embodiment of culture, economy and society. Essentially, individuals in Western culture have an unsustainable relationship with nature inculcated into them from early familial, educational and cultural relationships.

Amber recognises that students are often disconnected from nature throughout their youth, and sees this as being responsible for not only unsustainable practices, but also an incompleteness within the child’s self. The introduction and education towards inculcating sustainable environmental capital through some of the practices Amber discusses above like the ‘sensory walkway’ or ‘ecological footprint analysis’ may assist in redirecting and combining economic, social and cultural capitals into a sustainable matrix where actions are judged firstly for their ecological effects and then for their cultural or economic effects.

It is theorised that sustainable environmental capital could, if highly valued, eventually subsume cultural capital as the central capital possessed by an individual. In such a case, an individual will have acquired a ‘sustainable habitus’, the perspective that considers culture through the lens of sustainability, and then almost always mandates actions to ensure sustainable development is achieved. Furthermore, the connection and identification with nature that this educational process requires represents an opportunity for ethical and universal human flourishing, rather than the restrictive responsibilities commonly attributed to ESD.

Along such lines, I asked Amber if there were any values or beliefs that she thought important for students to have:

I think they need a deep understanding that they are part of one system - they're not above it or apart from it - they came from the Earth and they go back to the Earth. They need to know that powerfully ... Cause if you don't have a relationship with self and with Earth, how can you have relationship with other? To me, these are primary, or primal relationships that human beings as a species share - so I guess going back to some tribal values, and seeing that modern life has really detached us from those tribal values. - I think if you are connected to Earth you can't help but value your self, because you see the wonder of the Earth and the wonder of your creation, so you've got that sort of religious or spiritual thing there - what ever that may be for you.

This conception of ESD is a powerful one. Often, achieving sustainability through living sustainably is thought to be a restrictive process, though I contend that the movement towards developing a sustainable habitus is an opportunity to embrace a more authentic and ethical life, one where personal boundaries are softened and true community can emerge. I would argue that unless more schools adopt Amber's ecological sensibilities, the adults of tomorrow will perpetuate the practices responsible for our environmental crisis, thus degrading our ecosystems to the point that they will be unable to support human life. Simply put, schooling needs to foster environmental capital to ensure the survival of humanity.

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