

Sustainability

WE HAVE TO LEARN TO LIVE ON OUR PLANET, AND THAT'S A JOB THAT INVOLVES EDUCATORS, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

The learning focus in schools today is, appropriately, on the development of skills like numeracy and literacy, and on a curriculum designed to prepare young people for a productive and satisfying life as adults in the future. We have to ask ourselves, though, whether this is a school's only responsibility.

The aims for Australian schooling are defined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* made by the nation's education ministers in 2008. This statement makes it clear that schools have a responsibility to do more than pursue academic achievement in terms of the development of successful learners; they have to develop confident individuals, and active and informed citizens.

Schools are not just academic institutions; they operate in a broader personal and community context, and the community values to be inculcated include the desire and capacity to work for the common good as responsible local and global citizens.

Responsible citizens are concerned not just about community, but also about the whole ecosystem. Similarly, responsible schooling should be concerned not just with student development. Schools need to be working to ensure that their young people have a liveable society and ecosystem in which to thrive in the future.

Some see 'progress' as providing people with better food and longer lives. Others, less optimistically, see it as an insatiable appetite for economic growth that is destroying the life systems on which human wellbeing depends.

As *Guardian* columnist Madeleine Bunting observed in 'Seattle: a warning ignored' in the *Age* last year, 'A third of

the world's soils...are depleting faster than we regenerate them. On every continent an environmental catastrophe is brewing.... Australia is a cocktail of water scarcity, salination and soil erosion. The continent would have been better off if we had never discovered it.... We have been living in a civilisation that has been destroying the life systems on which human wellbeing depends. Never has it been so hard to argue that there is such a thing as progress and that it is represented by liberal capitalism.'

Whether you think our pursuit of economic growth is a good thing or a bad thing, we can all agree that our environmental problems have multiplied, and they've gone from being local to global, from relatively simple to highly complex. We can also all agree that they need to be addressed. The question is, how? The next question is, why should this issue be of critical concern for educators?

The answer to the first question lies in the answer to the second. As the man behind the Natural Step framework, Karl-Henrik Robèrt, explains, with Herman Daly, Paul Hawken and John Holmberg in 'A compass for sustainable development,' 'We are at a point now where we need to renegotiate the rules of our economic game so that they conform to the rules of the biophysical world, which cannot be amended, changed or negotiated.'

Put simply, we have to learn to live on our planet, and that's a job that involves educators.

The rules for our use of finite resources, according to ecological economists, in a nutshell are that:

- we develop renewable resources whose rate of use does not exceed its rate of regeneration

- we stop using non-renewable resources, and

- we reduce pollution emissions such that those emissions do not exceed the assimilative capacity of the environment.

Robèrt and colleagues nominate some critical requirements for any model of sustainability. Three of these requirements are particularly relevant to schools, since schools work with society's young people to develop an informed and active democracy as well as a responsible citizenship. These are that:

- on the microeconomic level, a model of sustainability shouldn't require individuals to act against their self interest

- a model of sustainability must be pedagogical and simple to disseminate, to enable the public consensus necessary to put any model into practice democratically, and

- a model of sustainability mustn't be adversarial or engender unnecessary resistance.

Our major focus in terms of restorative action currently is with structural and technological change. In places like Kyoto in 1997, Copenhagen last year and Mexico City this year, nations have and will look for agreement on a number of fronts and hopefully will seek agreement on further ambitious targets to reduce the damage already done to the Earth's biosphere.

The kinds of structural and technological changes being proposed *are* positive. Last year's Copenhagen United Nations Climate Change Conference actually ended with a political agreement to cap temperature rise, reduce emissions and raise finance, but such action doesn't go far enough. Essentially, what the Copenhagen conference proposed was a solution through government management and new technology – things like