

Field Study Essay

Randwick Sustainability Hub

Acknowledgement of Country:

I would like to acknowledge that this project was created on the land of the Gadigal and Bidjigal peoples who traditionally occupied the Sydney Coast. I acknowledge Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, and I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Introduction:

The Randwick Sustainability Hub (RSH) is an “award winning centre for practical education and experiencing nature” (“Randwick Sustainability Hub”, 2025), located in the heart of the Randwick City Council (RCC), next to the Randwick Environment Park. The reason why I picked this site is because the RSH serves as a good example of a site that creates sustainable changes despite the site being confined within capitalist constraints. I argue that we are able to create sustainable solutions to the environmental problems that we face regardless of the systems we might currently be restricted by. I do this by firstly breaking down the two frameworks I use to reflect this argument, the *Sustainability Framework* and the *Childhood Framework*, then question whether or not the RSH does promote sustainable practices, using the Sustainability Framework, then challenge the assertions made through the Sustainability Framework, using the Childhood Framework, and highlight that children are learning about nature, sustainability and environmental solutions, in defiance of the questions raised by the Sustainability Framework, and conclude that we are able to inspire sustainable changes in spite of the systems we are currently restrained in.

Literature Review:

The readings associated with the Sustainability Framework are useful in exploring what it actually means to be ‘sustainable’. This might appear to be a straightforward endeavour, however, as Banerjee points out: “Sustainability means different things to different people” (Banerjee, 2003, p. 145). Where this lack of a concrete definition becomes problematic is that different parties can impose their own definition on what is ‘sustainable’ for their own benefit. This is reflected when Banerjee brings up the concept of ‘Sustainable Development’, a concept

that attempts to bring ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ together, despite these two terms contradicting each other. Banerjee succinctly puts it in this way:

“Sustainable development attempts to reconcile these opposing interests and aims to maximize economic and environmental benefits simultaneously. This is a contradiction in terms, because sustainability and development are based on very different and often incompatible assumptions.” (Banerjee, 2003, p. 158)

The use of the term ‘Sustainable Development’ and other similar terms has become convenient for those in power to remain in power, as it allows them to make an enemy out of non-development in the name of ‘sustainability’ and continue to grow capital and acquire assets, even ‘environmental assets’, as Banerjee further highlights in his article.

This critique of ‘Sustainable Development’, and the subsequent “critique of modernity, with its metanarratives of progress and development.” (Banerjee, 2003, p. 170), reflects the ways in which the term ‘sustainability’ can be misused and puts into question whether or not we can be sustainable within the current systems that we’re in. Howes agrees with Banerjee here, stating:

“It is not enough to synthesize a statement that everyone agrees upon and amend a few laws. There needs to be a clear vision, strong leadership, a consistent long-term follow-up, substantial institutional restructuring, constructive engagement with stakeholders, and the commitment of significant resources. The goal should be to mainstream the principles of sustainability so that they become core to the decision-making and normal operation of organizations across the public, private, and community sectors.” (Howes, 2018, p. 1328)

The readings from the Sustainability Framework breakdown what it means to be sustainable and proposes that we cannot be sustainable unless we restructure the institutions that are currently in place so that sustainability is imbedded within the fabric of these organisations.

On the other hand, the readings associated with the Childhood Framework explores the relationships children have with nature and the effects that has on their development. This is reflected in Pyle's statement:

"All children are autodidacts, their subjects depending on the available curricula: if it is the streets, they will become street-wise; if it's computers, they'll be screen wizards. But if what is at hand is a scrap of the wild, at least some children will become naturalists before ever receiving instruction." (Pyle, 2002, p. 311)

Pyle's article also puts preference on grounds that haven't been interfered with by humans over 'natural' environments that have been developed by humans and highlights the ignorance adults might have towards children's preference towards a natural environment:

"Realtors will continue to call it "waste ground." But in my view, nothing is less wasted than ground where the hand of man has held back and the minds of boys and girls can engage with plants and animals and dirt, nothing more sacred than land that is yet raw and ripe with surprise." (Pyle, 2002, pp. 323-324)

This dismissal of natural environments over more controlled man-made environments also has negative effects on children. Pyle shares his worries about the "current epidemic of early onset obesity" (Pyle, 2002, p. 315) and the downward spiral that this leads to.

What Pyle's article points to is the importance of preserving the natural environment for children. As Chawla puts it in her article: "children need opportunities to identify with natural areas and that they, as well as the natural environment, need protection." (Chawla, 2002, p. 221). And as both articles go on to highlight, should children develop a stronger connection to nature, they'd be more inspired to protect it.

Analysis:

Sustainability Framework:

Since it is not possible for me to get a hold of the balance sheets of the RSH, I can only judge through my own observations whether or not the RSH does what it sets out to do: Promote sustainable practices. That being said, revenue must come from somewhere, as the RSH couldn't maintain the site without its staff. And considering that most of the workshops and events that are held at the RSH are done for free, then I deduce that the revenue for the site must come from the RCC. This reflects a point of contention, as the RSH lies in the middle of providing value for the community and the RCC determining what the RSH can and can't do. Should the RSH find itself in a situation where it is obliged by the RCC to not do something because of budgetary restrictions but is also of value to the community, the RSH could find itself in conflict with the community as the community would then argue that the RSH isn't promoting sustainable practices. A site like the RSH might be prevented from doing what is sustainable because of the economic constraints imposed on the site.

However, an argument that I put forward that makes the RSH different from other institutions, especially the institutions that Banerjee has criticised in his article, is that the RSH isn't using the guise of 'Sustainable Development'. I argue this simply because the RSH is not developing. The RSH isn't expanding the site in any shape or form. The RSH isn't knocking down the houses around it to expand the site, it's not adding high-rise buildings, it's not franchising. There's no development being made.

The obvious rebuttal to my argument is that the RSH must have been developed previously, even if it is not developing any longer. And this is true, especially after considering that the site used to be a Naval base. The RSH couldn't have been transformed into the site that it is now without some form of development. And I do accept this. But again, the RSH isn't being developed now and is not utilising 'metanarratives' that Banerjee has pointed out in order to sell the idea that the RSH is being sustainable. And since the RSH isn't doing this, the RSH isn't making decisions with profit being priority and could be seen as an institution that does

provide sustainable practices through education, despite existing within our current economic system.

But with all that being said, whilst the RSH might operate in a way that isn't profit driven, the RSH is still beholden to the RCC and, in turn, the revenue that the RCC provides. The RSH might not be developing, but it still has to be maintained. Money is needed to pay the staff and the resources needed to maintain the site. Thus, the RSH is still restricted by its current system as to what it can and can't do, and suggests that there is a limit to the actual sustainable changes that could be made within this current economic system.

Childhood Framework:

The RSH has two children's playgrounds, a Nature playground, classrooms, five gardens, a large open field and a wildlife reserve, giving children plenty of opportunity to learn about and interact with nature. Pyle would probably object to this, highlighting that since the RSH is man-made, children aren't really connecting with nature, as they would if they were in a forest that hadn't been interfered with by humans. And I do understand this argument. However, from my observations, children do play with the more natural environment areas at RSH. They play, draw, chase, explore, do all the activities children do. And while the RSH isn't completely natural, and after considering that the RSH is so convenient for families to get to, existing in the middle of a suburban area, there's no reason why a child who enjoys playing at the RSH wouldn't be inspired to then explore a more natural environment and from doing so, strengthen their bond with nature. In this sense, the RSH can act as a very good introduction to nature that still produces the same results that Pyle and Chawla are hoping for, even though the RSH isn't an entirely natural environment.

Seeing as it is possible for children to be inspired by nature and sites like the RSH, and for them to become the leaders we need to solve the environmental problems we face, an argument that I would like to raise against the Sustainability Framework is that it is not the

systems that shape us but the people within those systems. If you were to have an amazing system with people who didn't care about nature and only cared about profit, then it doesn't matter how great the system is, as the people would only go after profit. While on the other hand, if you had a poor system, but people who cared for the environment, then those people will change the system to care for the environment. Our current system might be limiting us now, but with the right people, we can make the changes needed. The Sustainability Framework here would argue that it is only once these systemic changes have been made, by these inspired people, that real sustainability could be reached. But what I am highlighting is that inspiring people, changing minds, has to come first. Not the other way around. It is then reflected that the RSH does promote sustainable practices by inspiring children (and adults) to develop a stronger connection to nature, so that they can care for and help us to protect it.

Conclusion:

While the Sustainability Framework does pose valid questions on whether or not a site like the RSH does actually lead to sustainable changes, the Childhood Framework highlights that it is the people within these systems, not the systems themselves, that make the environmental changes that are needed. And by inspiring future, and current, generations to care for nature, we can make the changes required, regardless of the current system we are in. It is because of this that I deduce that the Childhood Framework is more effective in bringing about opportunities for sustainable changes. The Sustainability Framework would argue that it is more effective in bringing about opportunities for sustainable changes because it recognises and criticises the lack of sustainable practices within a system and that this is more useful in bringing about the sustainable changes that are needed. However, the Sustainability Framework doesn't present much of a solution to our environmental challenges. Howes does suggest that we develop "a clear vision, strong leadership, a consistent long-term follow-up,

substantial institutional restructuring, constructive engagement with stakeholders, and the commitment of significant resources.” (Howes, 2018, p. 1328), but a question is raised as to how this can be done, especially without inspiring people. If people aren’t inspired to make the changes needed, they simply won’t. Therefore, the Childhood Framework is more effective because it not only provides a solution, but a solution that is adaptable. In inspiring children to become involved in nature and sustainable practices, the RSH is building leaders for the future, leaders who are inspired to build sustainable practices within the fabric of the systems we operate in, who are able to learn as they move forward, and be more equipped to spread the knowledge and wisdom required for us to act more sustainably. Thus, the RSH shows us that we can create sustainable solutions, despite the restrictions of the system we’re currently in, and, in turn, produce the sustainable changes needed to solve the environmental problems we’re all faced with.

References:

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