

## Executive Summary – Research Project 2010

### *Exploring Student Engagement Through a Community-School Sustainability/Arts Education Project*

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#### **Executive Summary**

This research project sought to explore the nature of the learning and triggers for engagement as related to one school-based project, entitled *Tree-Mappa*. The intent was to explore the impact of using arts-based approaches to environmental education through a focus on something to be found in most school environments, the humble tree. The approach used connected school involvement in a regional project that aimed to celebrate significant local trees as a stepping stone to raise awareness of local and global sustainability issues.

*TreeMappa* took place as part of a larger regional community project entitled *TreeLine*. This program was a regional green-art initiative, which aimed to connect communities and ask them to consider local ecosystems through creativity, research and education. The research was conducted in one primary school based in a coastal community. The school has approximately 500 students and a history of commitment to arts education programs and “sustainable environmental. Four teachers self nominated to be involved in the project (and related research agenda) as they felt it was relevant to them individually and matched with their school profile.

For this study the research methodology used was mixed method. Qualitative research tools included student and teacher focus group interviews, student written reflections, art-based recall and analysis of classroom observations. The data was organized and coded with an initial focus on the student written/drawn reflective data. This was complemented by analysis of the focus group interview data, observations the researcher and interviews with the classroom teachers. Data was therefore triangulated to identify and consolidate key factors and triggers for engagement.

The data revealed that most students didn't necessarily feel motivated or interested in the content and specific focus to begin with but many became connected and engaged through a range of triggers. These included prior experience and an initial interest in the subject matter and the environment. Other students connected through engaging with nature and having a frame for that experience through arts processes such as drawing or taking photographs.

The analysis of the written/reflection data identified students reporting that their engagement was activated by a number of key factors, including:

- Arts-based learning and processes which allowed for students to make and create with a degree of agency;

- Excursions and out of classroom activities that took them out of the classroom;
- Meeting outside experts including an author, an artist and a veteran resident of the area; and
- Interactions with nature and learning about nature.

There were different points where engagement moved from attention and interest into interactions that required ongoing commitment. Many of the experiences that had most impact required a form of creative engagement where students had a sense of agency and input into making a creative product. The learnings they recalled included arts and science based learnings but also personal and environmental learning and some signalled changes in attitudes (see figure 1)



In terms of implications for the planning of environmental and sustainability learning programs, it would seem that a consideration of different triggers is required for hooking students into attention and interest, and further recognition of the potential of using arts and experienced based activities to turn interest into committed interactions, creative engagement and learning.