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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN: LOCALLY SECURE, GLOBALLY AFRAID?

Jonathon Sargeant

INTRODUCTION

Australia can be described as a modern, technologically advanced and wealthy Western society that holds a somewhat confused place in the global community. Australians consider themselves to be active global citizens and as such enjoy participation in discourses regarding world futures, politics, environmental sustainability and terrorism. While Australian governments have forged strong international alliances, the rest of the world is often accused of largely ignoring the Australian ‘position’ on key issues. However, in geographic terms, Australia is a long way from everywhere. Even with this relative remoteness of their place in the world, Australians are regularly confronted with images and information of issues a long way from home.

Australians are keen observers of world events and the access to such information is often fast (Robertson, 2000), relatively uncensored and, in many cases more forthcoming than at the place of origin. Unfortunately, this flow of information has been attributed to some extent to a loss of innocence in the Australian way of life, as Demetriou, (2005 online) writes, “We seem to have lost our sense of adventure, our sense of backing ourselves, our sense of looking towards tomorrow, preferring to worry about today.” With this sentiment resonating with Australian adults, it begs the question: “What affect does this have on Australian children?”

Australians enjoy a relatively safe and affluent lifestyle. There are strong social support structures in place for the unemployed and poor, and natural disasters are a rare occurrence. Civil violence and terrorism is almost non-existent on Australian soil, yet these are issues frequently identified by Australians as a major concern. Australian children have a strong knowledge of abject poverty in other parts of the world; they share the despair at natural disasters; they express fear at the prospect of terrorist attacks; and they express a concern for the future of the planet. In carrying this breadth of knowledge about others, Australian children are faced with the challenge of balancing the external information they gather, with their experiences and knowledge of their own life-world: the one that is personal,
local and consistent on a day-to-day basis. Of interest is not that Australian children hold the above concerns, but that these concerns are mostly borne out of knowledge, not experience.

An issue of great concern to adults regarding young children is not about their future, but about their current participation in the community, their behaviour, the morality, and the general safety of children in the wake of declining societal values (Simpson, 2004). Community leaders such as teachers and priests, who were previously deemed beyond reproach, are now subject to criminal checks. Children are no longer able to play in local parks unaccompanied. Ironically, the adults who determine the relative safety of a child’s local world are now the very adults who are considered to be of threat (Furedi, 2004). The concerns that adults hold for the future often relate to employment issues facing adolescents. These concerns are not necessarily about the social benefits and contributions of employment, but more about easing the burden of the community in providing welfare for the unemployed.

In Australia, an aging population, and the associated pressures to provide support for retirees in terms of housing, health, and leisure services magnify this potential economic burden.

Within any particular study, young children may be asked their opinion on the environment, but not their home life or family relationships. They may be asked their view on war and global conflict, but not on their experience of school. While this is a necessary constraint that could be placed on any research project (Cohen and Manion, 1994), the increasing body of research into the environment, for example, could serve to present a picture that worries about the environment are the dominant concerns of young children today. This assumption may be drawn because the environment and the future are things that children are being asked about more frequently than in the past. However, this study reveals that the overall perception of these children is that they are genuinely concerned and pessimistic about global issues, but they maintain a positive outlook of the future from a personal and local perspective.

In an unstable world that has more threats than opportunities, adults continue to make adjustments and regulate to ensure the safety and freedom of children. As a result, it is unclear what the children themselves actually think about their world (Robertson, 2000), as Furedi, (2001:121) notes, “even the demand for ‘children’s rights’ has been formulated by adults”. Do children actually believe the neighbourhood holds the inherent dangers identified by adults and to what extent do restrictions such as those on play in the name of safety have on their views of the future? Are these children worrying about the same things adults are worrying about on their behalf, and to what extent is this effecting children’s views of their world?

**THE CHILD’S PERSPECTIVE**

This chapter discusses the key concerns and hopes of Australian children, from their own perspectives. To achieve this insight, a group of 505 Australian children were asked a series of open-ended questions that focused on their personal perspective of their world. They were then asked to draw a picture of how they saw the future. The comments of young children presented herein are drawn from their written responses to the following key questions:

- What makes you worry?
• What do you need to be happy?
• If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?

Following their responses to these questions, the children were then asked to “draw a picture of what the world will be like when you are the same age as your parents.” In giving the children an opportunity to draw a picture, they were able to utilise an alternative communicative domain subsequent to the writing task. This enables the children to express themselves in a different way and communicate a richly abstract concept that is the future (Wright, 2001).

Wright (2001:3) asserts that “drawing is one symbol system where children use imagery, often more fluently and articulately than they do language”. This research did not have the children provide any commentary and the analysis presented is drawn from the content contained in the images alone. The pictures themselves in most cases clearly present the intent of the child in his or her drawing. A selection of the drawings made by the children is included in this paper.

The participants for this study were drawn from primary schools in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia. Armidale is a medium-sized rural city with a population of approximately 25000 people. It is located mid-way between Sydney and Brisbane and is approximately 200 km inland from coastal Coffs Harbour. In one sense, Armidale is atypical of other rural centres in that education is one of its main industries. Located in a prosperous wool and livestock region, it is the home of the University of New England and with that, Armidale has a strong reputation for educational excellence from early childhood education through to tertiary studies.

The participating schools consisted of three co-educational government schools and two co-educational non-government schools. The size of the schools and participant numbers from each varied. The children aged between eight and twelve years were free to answer the questions in any way they chose. Considering their limited life experience and knowledge, the responses they gave across this age range were in some ways predictable and in other ways inspired.

THE CHILD’S VIEW OF THEIR WORLD

The body of research that investigates the perspectives or views of children often have a focus on those in their adolescent years (Arnett, 2000; Hirschfeld, 2002). This relatively narrow focus suggests that the perspectives of adolescents warrant more attention than younger children, primarily because of their imminent entry into adulthood. This attention to the “next group” of adults is warranted because any optimism held by young children is challenged significantly as they progress into adolescence. Their future views become tinged with increased pessimism in terms of employment and prosperity. However, as Geldard and Geldard, (2004) note, their value in family and friendships does not diminish. Just as the views of adolescents and their consequent pessimism is paid significant attention and is well documented, the views of younger children are often largely ignored, “accordingly, we adults are likely to judge the views of children as, at best, inchoate and incomplete, and at worst just plain wrong” (Splitter, 2000: 63).
Within the limited research investigating the views of pre-adolescent children, Hicks and Holden (1995) identify the perspectives of 7 year olds and 11 year olds. They suggest that 11 year olds are very aware of global issues such as violence and the environment and have a growing consciousness of global issues while making a local link to wider global concerns. Seven year olds, on the other hand, often maintain an egocentric attitude that has many links to ‘fantasy’ although the authors note that their fears, while fantasy, are very ‘real’ to the children. Children in this age range are often accused of blurring fantasy with reality and not recognising the difference between a real and unreal threat (Minow and LaMay, 1996). The responses presented here contradict this theory. The children know exactly what is happening in their own and others’ life-worlds, and identify them for the concern they generate: “I would change Osama bin Laden killing all those innocent souls in the Twin Towers” (Female 10 years).

Other studies such as those by Silverman, La Greca and Wasserstein, (1995) and Weems, Silverman and La Greca, (2000), give less credence to these “dramatic” worries because of the extremity of their nature and the unlikelihood of their occurrence. This view suggests that practitioners should only attend to those worries that have a high level of credibility. In reality, these fantasies may have a metaphoric importance in our understanding of the views of young children: “I’m worried people will break into my house, the earth will pop, my mum and dad will divorce” (Male 9 years). “That reality and fantasy sit side by side in the children’s visions of the future is not a reason for ignoring their interest” (Hicks and Holden, 1995:100).

EMERGING THEMES

This study revealed a number of key themes reflecting the perspectives of these children. Of note is the emphasis on interpersonal relationships, a balance between global and local perspectives and a sense that the children hold firm understandings and perspectives on reality. The major themes identified as they emerged independently from the responses included, family relationships, the future, friendships, the environment, the local community, the global community, global unrest, and self. Specific issues and events emerged that can reside under these categories, but the key themes identified above pervade the idiosyncratic nature of each response. The children’s responses were personal and highlight an emphasis on safety as a prerequisite to a positive future. A significant feature of the children’s responses was their altruistic nature. The children’s answers were taken at “face value” (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Coles, 1986) and it was these direct perspectives of the children that most informed the research.

While the sophistication of the children’s responses tended to increase with the child’s age, the range and type of responses did not necessarily vary greatly across the age range. This indicates that the children are giving thought and developing definite perspectives on key issues at a younger age than previously considered. Although there is a significant difference in the levels of knowledge and experience between an eight year-old and a twelve year-old, the issues they identify are similar. Considering the varying detail in the responses, recurring themes continued to emerge both within an individual survey and across the group of children. The responses given in both written and picture form across the age range reveals
an enlightened group of children who hold strong personal views of their life-world and the future: “Children are constantly noticing who gets along with whom, and why” (Coles, 1986: 78).

The personalisation of the children’s responses suggests a presence of a sense of altruism influencing their lives. Their expressed view is often altruistic and expressed in terms of benefit to others than purely to self “I worry when my family or friends get hurt and need to go to the hospital” (Male, 11 years). Children of this age are not generally credited with having a deep sense of other that could be termed altruistic (Werner, 2004). A popular notion is that children of this age range have concerns or desires that are predominantly framed in terms of the benefit and welfare to self. However, in this study, the children express personal gain in terms of the gains of those around them. “I am happy when I know everyone of my family are alright” (Female 11 years). They see their individual futures as actively and personally involved members of a community, “I need all my friends to be kind to me. I need mum and dad to love each other and me. I’m happy when everyone is healthy” (Female 12 years). They identify with local issues as they affect family and friends.

The children demonstrated a strong awareness of global issues particularly pollution and terrorism, although a dichotomy between these main themes is apparent. Pollution has a local contextual relevance as children are educated about environmental issues and encouraged to be environmentally aware. Conversely, the identification of issues such as terrorism may be seen as curious in that, it is not a threat that is prevalent in the local context. Terrorism remains a remote threat to Australians. Even when Australians are directly affected by global incidents, for example, the Bali bombings in 2002, it is an event that does not occur on Australian soil. A factor that may explain the influence of these concerns on children’s expression is their access to the media and other technologies. Through television and the Internet, children are increasingly aware of global threats and the importance they are given by the wider global community (Simpson, 2004).

**FAMILY**

![Figure 1. Family.](image)

In many of the children’s writings and in their drawings, images of family provided a consistent pointer to their priority. Above all other influences, the children clearly identify
their family as their greatest influence. Figure 1 shows a typical drawing of a family scene with the mother presenting as a positive and protective figure of the baby and young girl holding on to her leg. Within this drawing it is interesting to note that there is no father figure present, although many of the drawings of family included both parents. The role of the family, in particular parents, was a strong theme that emerged in the results. The children expressed a genuine concern for the welfare of others, particularly family and friends, “I worry when my family members could be in danger, it frightens me or if my family is hurt in the hospital (Female 10 years). The presence and importance of family demonstrates the children’s strong attachment to a secure local environment. The important role of the family in young children’s lives is widely reported in Australia and the position of family and associated values is regarded as a cornerstone in the development of community (Simpson, 2004).

Considering, that by this age they are spending more time at school and mixing in ever increasing circles of social and functional activity, the children recognise that their physical and more importantly, their emotional well-being is determined predominantly by their family, and in particular their parents. It is apparent that Mum, Dad and close family members are the most important people for children in this age range for the key reasons of security, wellbeing, nurturing, and education. This is in part, recognition for the role the family has played in the development of the child, but it also reflects a child’s recognition of the important role of the family into their future. For these children, the stability and consistency of the family unit is paramount. It is the one stable feature of their life to this point and one that they hope will remain so into the future, “My family and friends because they make me feel happy and they won’t let me down” (Female 10 years).

THE WORLD

In expressing their perspective on the wider world, these children comment mostly on issues of global unrest. They express a desire for peaceful solutions to international conflict. “I worry that Australia is going to get bombed by terrorists” (Male 10 years). In identifying issues of concern that are both global and local, the children suggest that communities can make a positive change and address the major issues of concern, and the children maintain an optimistic view that this will happen. The fears of the future shown in the drawings (Figure 2) include such images as scenes of destruction and representations of an aftermath of war. Drawings such as these demonstrated a genuine fear of the future by some children. They showed great detail, included graphic detail of bomb craters, and twisted wreckage of destroyed buildings. The depictions of smoke and storm clouds amplify the images of gloom with other drawings showing streetscapes of destruction (Figure 2).

PLACE IN SOCIETY

While investigating the data presented in this study, it is as interesting to investigate what information is not present in the children’s responses. An emphasis in the literature in recent times has been the dramatic rise in turbulent global unrest.
A number of researchers and commentators have suggested that young children’s lives have been irrevocably damaged by the constant bombardment by the media in relation to such events (Simpson 2004). Parents are being exhorted to monitor their children’s activities, be diligent in their supervision, and in particular limit their children’s exposure to the media (Furedi, 2001; Minow and LaMay, 1996; Simpson, 2004). While cataclysmic global events are mentioned by many of the children, the mention of television and other technologies is conspicuous by its absence in the responses. This may indicate an acceptance by children of the role of technology as such a regular feature in their lives that it is not worthy of specific mention.

A key feature of the children’s’ responses was their ability to make links with real events. There is no question that the world as a whole is far less safe in terms of predictable dangers than in the most recent decades and on the surface, the conception of a generation of troubled children is indisputable. Global and civil unrest are at very high levels and pose significant threats to many people’s lifestyle and personal safety. Other issues such as domestic violence, child abuse and neglect are also at the highest reported levels ever (Edwards, 2004). Unemployment and poverty presents as significant threats to a community’s security. Communities in general are increasingly worried about many of these and other features of society, and Australian children demonstrate an awareness of global issues as they consider themselves a part of the global community - “I would change all the friction and wars between countries” (Female 12 years). Global issues have a strong effect on children, but it is balanced with an optimism based on the Australian way of life. Their knowledge of these realities do not overwhelm their sense of optimism of the future, nor do they prevent their identification of the positive features in their lives (Sargeant, 2004), “What I need to be happy is my family to love me, buy me things and let me get a good education (Female 11 years).

These children value their relative freedoms within their own community. They are optimistic about their future in terms of aspirations and employment prospects and base their optimism on their current life-world. Their experience of their family situation forms the
foundation for this optimism and in forming this optimism they value family above all else. In formulating their social values, they value friendships. Australian children believe technological advances are inevitable, but are not fearful of them. They embrace new technologies readily as supporting mechanisms. They utilise technologies for their expediency and convenience. They do not see technological advances as a threat to their futures.

The children clearly demonstrate their wide knowledge of global events not directly affecting their life-world, “I would take away all poverty and reverse October 12 (Bali) and September 11” (Male 11 years). The children are aware of many issues affecting today’s society and in the space of a few short questions they demonstrate a strong understanding of the important features in their lives and equally demonstrate an awareness of what is important to the wider community. The children were able to quickly shift their thinking to events beyond their local environment, “I would like all the fighting in the world to finish and there was no killing and an equal right for all” (Male 12 years).

**ENVIRONMENT**

The children identify key specific environmental issues, but mainly as they relate to their local context, “I would change the weather so our farmers don’t have to live in drought any longer” (Male, 11 years old). An environmental issue of most contextual relevance to Australian children is pollution and as such, it is afforded the most expressions of concern, “If I could change one thing in the world, it would be to stop letting people throw rubbish on the ground that can be recycled” (Male 9 years).

Issues of the environment are often presented as a community and global problem that requires a community or global solution. One of the greatest hurdles in environmental education is having people make an individual association with the issue; to acknowledge that one person is as much a part of the problem as the solution (Wilson, 1985). Environmental issues have built up over decades and require concerted efforts over decades to reverse the damage that is already done. By contrast, an issue such as an end to terrorism or world peace, while in reality a highly complex social and political issue, it has a connotation that if a decision was made, a solution could become immediately available and acted upon and therefore more possible to achieve in the short term. The potential dangers relating to terrorism are more real and immediate to the children, not only because of exposure to the mass media, but also because of the reality that if conflicts do occur, they can harm many people very quickly. Apart from unpredictable natural disasters, perceptions prevail that harm to the environment does not pose an immediate threat, “I would stop every war in the world and have peace” (Female 12 years). “Plant more trees and don’t bomb towns and cities” (Female 9 years).

Figure 3 shows a view of the future showing the contrast between city and country. The environment emerged as a strong theme in many of the children’s drawings in particular showing a clear divide between city and country. The city is depicted as a darkened forbidding place shrouded in pollution, the sun is distorted in colour and the stars are dim in the sky. By contrast, the country is depicted as clean and bright, within a naturalistic theme. The scene is bright with birds, a bright sun, and large green trees.
Researchers suggest that children are becoming increasingly pessimistic at a very young age about what the future holds for them. Indeed some literature suggests that children do not think there will be a world in which to grow up (Wilson 1985). Australian children’s views of the future are for the most part encapsulated by the phrase “intended possibilities”. Even at this young age, they maintain a pragmatic view of the future: “If I could change one thing in the world it would be for the children in poor countries to have homes, schools and parents (Male 8 years). The future is often discussed as an extrapolation of their current view of their life-world (Hicks and Holden, 1995). Figure 4 shows a scene with a melding of city and country or suburbia. The caption: “I just want the world to be normal!” is representative of the desire for a preferred future rather than an expected future.

The children demonstrated a high level of value in personal relationships as a cornerstone to a positive future. The dangers of the present, point to a future of despair and hopelessness. However, in many of the children’s statements and particularly in their drawings they qualify this pessimistic outlook with comments such as “better world” and “Peace”.

The majority do not speak about futures that are blatantly impossible such as space ships and interplanetary colonisation although technology and futuristic portrayals were often similar to Figure 5. Of those that did show a futuristic world, many included flying transportation and geometrically defined buildings. In many of the pictures of this theme,
there were no people represented. Some drawings (Figure 6) also added labels such as “more pollution, traffic” and “updated technology” to further quantify a changed future.

Figure 4. Suburbia.

Figure 5. Space Age.
The drawings made by these children represented a rich set of data complementary to the writing task. They present evidence of the children’s capacity to communicate significant perspectives via different domains with similar effect (Robertson, 2000, Furth, 1988; and Wright, 2003). The pictures are complementary to the written responses they had given earlier. The selected pictures also show the high level of detail in these depictions.

Overall, the themes in the pictures were positive, suggesting that the children made representations of a preferred future and an expected future based on local experiences. The negative drawings suggest an expected future that are an extrapolation of issues existing in the global community for example increased pollution and global conflict. The preferred futures did not necessarily clearly represent a reduction in current issues, although a picture of a family scene (Figure 1) might imply that the world is a safe place. The positively stated drawing that extrapolated current conditions showed images like a happy family and home, mirroring the conditions they currently live in.

Some drawings depict events that express futility while others make contingency statements such as “a messy world if people don’t start to take care”. The children clearly identify their preferred futures (Figure 7) and in doing so add captions to further make their point. This is supported by Furth (1996) who suggests that children who place captions on drawings are using the words to ensure the reader receives the message.
In another captioned drawing (Figure 8), a scene is presented with a family, possibly in a village or in the country. The sun is rising over the horizon. The participant has added the caption, “I want the world to never have wars again”. This image suggests that the child is somewhat confused about the future. The drawing by itself is positive, but her comment suggests that she may not be convinced that her future expectations and hopes for the future will be aligned. The caption is similar to many of the pictures that included a commentary. It is suggestive that the future can be positive, but certain criteria need to be met. In this representation, the written word expresses a desire for wars to end. Other pictures were similar to Figure 8. They showed a “portrait” of a positive a family unit.

**CONCLUSION**

The perspectives expressed by these Australian children demonstrate two key points. Firstly, they value their genuine place in the global community through their awareness and concern for people under threat of issues that they themselves do not experience. Secondly, they maintain a very strong sense of place in their local community; they are optimistic about theirs and others’ futures, but qualify this optimism by expressing a sense of duty to achieving future prosperity.
These children present a perceptive awareness of global issues and local threats. They are not ignorant of the key issues affecting their futures and are able to identify clearly the important features that can lead to a positive future. Their placement of positive relationships at the top of their priorities equips them to address other issues with a balanced mindset. As Skilbeck, (1970: 62) commented:

"[the child] “it is said, has all kinds of interests, good bad and indifferent. It is necessary to decide the interests that are really important and those that are trivial; between those that are helpful and those that are harmful; between those that are transitory or mark immediate excitement, and those which endure and are permanently influential.”"

Australian children see themselves as having some control over their futures. Importantly, they know and understand more about their life-world and external influences than they are often given credit. These children are aware of the range of issues affecting them and others. Adults would be well advised to value their awareness as education programs are developed and new local and global issues emerge.

As demonstrated through their decisive and insightful responses in this study, these children are skilled at developing their social knowledge base and acting on that knowledge. Their qualified optimism and thoughtful perspectives suggests a cohort of willing participants in positive futures. The first thing we need to do is listen.
REFERENCES


