

MILLENNIUM KIDS: YOUTH LEADING CHANGE

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Abstract

In the early 1990's a teacher mused that environmental education would one day have the highest priority. Over several years she'd led students to adopt landscapes and working with other teachers had embedded environmental education in cross-curriculum processes. In 1995 her students attended the first United Nations Environment Program Children's Environmental Conference where the rights of youth to have a say about their world was highlighted. This conference was the catalyst that brought together in Western Australia a team of young people and adults to support youth to make a difference. In 1999 Millennium Kids Inc. began and young people have been voicing their concerns, pitching ideas, making change and caring for their local environment since. Processes developed by Millennium Kids focus on hearing youth and facilitating meaningful opportunities for them to take local action to implement their ideas. By highlighting Millennium Kids' learnings this paper aims to inspire thought on how young people might be included in other stakeholder engagement models – they are the changemakers who will inherit the planet, after all.

Introduction

Millennium Kids acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of Australia and recognises their ongoing role, responsibilities and continuing connection to land, waters, culture and knowledges. Millennium Kids acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land where we operate and respects its Elders past and present and as living leaderships.

Founded in Western Australia in 1999, Millennium Kids is a not-for-profit environmental youth organisation that is grounded in the rights of the child to have a say about their world and their future. Preparing this paper prompted reflection and provided an opportunity to ponder how Millennium Kids may have or may not have influenced the environmental education agenda across Australia and beyond, and to consider *where to from here?* This paper highlights learnings from Millennium Kids over nearly 30 years. It is hoped this will inspire others to apply and build upon Millennium Kids' findings and to avoid some pitfalls. It is not just about letting youth have a voice, it is also about engaging young people more and in more meaningful ways in supported youth-led action, because we need the young people who will inherit the planet to be the changemakers now.

Tsundoko. My journey

Many books are bought only to let them pile up on the shelf. Statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb believes surrounding ourselves with unread books, '*tsundoko*', enriches our lives as they remind us of how much we don't know. This word reinforces that we are on a journey, we never stop learning, we keep adding to our knowledge and refining our view of the world and how it works. This is childlike behaviour; it is what kids do naturally and subconsciously. Children don't get bogged down like adults around them frequently do when defending an indefensible position. Children keep asking the big questions.

My name is Catrina Luz Aniere. My father told me *Aniere* means *sword fighter*. It's a pity that we can now google *Aniere* and discover it means *donkey cart driver*! As a child I liked the sword fighter story, fighting against injustice, but as years passed I began to appreciate the characteristics of a donkey: intelligent, stubborn, logical, but with a flexible approach to problem solving - and the image of the cart driver getting the job done. I was born in England of an Australian mother. My father's family fled the Basque region for England during the Spanish civil war, then migrated to Whadjuk country, just outside Perth, in 1962. Pondering one's origin can be important when discussing views, particularly on environmental education and planet care; it also helps sum up attitudes to *Country*: change and adapt.

My Basque father opted for a farm life and my early memories are of dairy cows and water conservation, of tapping the water tank to see where the level was, and sharing bath water. Free play in the bush, bare feet in winter creeks, catching tadpoles and gilgies, talking to birds, and solace amongst trees. Conversations were had

about not levelling the bush block at the front of the farm and about neighbours protecting river areas. Not many, but enough for my young ears to understand that bush had value.

Those early experiences informed my journey as an environmental educator, which has always been embedded in action learning or student-centred learning. Kids outside, experiencing nature, doing science, writing stories and poetry, asking questions. Celebrating awe and wonder. I had planted my first trees in salt prone gullies and questioned the clearing of farming areas before graduating as a primary school teacher in the 1980s and heading thousands of kilometres north to the Pilbara.

While working in the north an Indigenous teacher invited me to travel with his uncle, an Elder, on Country in the vast Kimberley region. On the road trip the Elder asked me a simple question: *What is your job?* I replied *'I teach children how to read'*, to which he responded *'then I will teach you how to read the land.'* This was a pivotal moment, one of deep reflection, on the beginnings of understanding another language and other ways of seeing and doing.

In the Pilbara we began supporting five-year-old students to ask the big questions and then to seek the answers. When a tap was left running we asked "where does our water come from?". To find the answer we followed the water pipe, literally, from the classroom to the water tower in town a 10 kilometre long bus ride away. *But how did the water get to the tower?* To answer this a local high school teacher drove the bus to the De Grey River 80 kilometres away, where we lay on the ground to hear the water being pumped. We discovered the Port Hedland Water Supply. The kids made the connections. They learnt through action and gave meaning and reason to the sign above the tap: "water is precious".

On returning to a school in the city in 1991 the Swan River was close by. It made sense to make the river a classroom as it was so close, as was Perth Zoo. The river was a perfect site for an outdoor classroom. Unfortunately, a freeway straddled and fragmented a migratory bird feeding area on the mud flats along the river's edge and restricted the community's access to the water. With the aid of an overpass it still provided good opportunities to engage the students in nature. Building on Pilbara experience we developed action-learning programs based on the student's questions. These let the kids explore, ask more questions, develop projects, foster partnerships and make community connections. Where do the birds come from? Where have the plants gone? Why did they put the freeway here? Can the freeway be put underground?

A whole-of-school project was developed in collaboration with Perth Zoo, local and state government, and with the community. Teachers were on board. Artists in Residence produced murals of migratory birds. Raps were written in music class. Trees were planted. Even the bike safety teacher worked out a way to build the program into the curriculum. The local council recognised the value of this work and asked if it could be scaled up to include all schools in their area – the Bushland Project had begun.

Teachers elsewhere in the state were concerned about the lack of environmental education in the curriculum at that time. Science, English, geography and primary school teachers more generally gave voice to the need for Department of Education support. A group of teachers formed *Green Teach* which drove an agenda of change, ran professional learning workshops and brought bright minds together to exchange ideas. Environmental education was woven into the curriculum and frameworks were developed for how it could be cross-curricular. We shared learnings, advocated for change and met with ministers to seek support. These groups were pivotal in framing a vision for teachers with **agency**.

Grounded in early childhood education philosophy we challenged the status quo and got the students outdoors. As our professional agency was being questioned and diminished by a rigid curriculum a multitude of questions were forming. How do we hold onto our agency and best give agency to the young people in our care? How do we embrace new thinking, keep learning, challenge ourselves to review and evaluate our processes and our thinking, to do things better? How do we best engage with young people so they become thinking, active custodians now and in the future? There were highs and there were lows.

The lows:

- We approached the Minister for Education with the idea that every piece of school bushland was a living, breathing museum, an educational place that needed to be preserved for future generations, where children could learn life sciences based in reality in real time. We didn't get a second meeting.
- Good teachers who loved their roles left, exhausted by administrivia and unrealistic reporting procedures.

The highs:

- Scaling environmental education across the local government area and supporting teachers and students at this scale
- The school-based Bushland Project won a Greening Australia Award in 1993.
- Student leaders from the school Bushland Project were invited to join the first United Nations Environment Program *Leave It To Us* Children's Environment Conference in the UK in 1995. On their return they wanted to hold their own conference in WA, a conference for kids that was led by kids.
- Clean up Australia's Ian Kiernan said he would listen to the kids, take on their ideas, and be *The Keeper of the Challenges* for their first conference in 1996.

Children's environmental rights and youth voice

The idea of Millennium Kids leading their own conference on children's rights to a safe and healthy planet followed their excursion to the UNEP UK *Leave It To Us* conference in 1995.

Agency is the sense of control that you feel in your life, your capacity to influence your own thoughts and behaviour, and have faith in your ability to handle a wide range of tasks and situations. Your sense of agency helps you to be psychologically stable, yet flexible in the face of conflict or change (Serfontein, 2021).

The Children's Environmental Rights Initiative seeks to ensure that children's rights are placed at the centre of environmental decision-making and action. Its overarching goal is to secure international recognition of children's fundamental right to a safe and healthy environment (CERI 2023).

The idea consolidated when they saw a video of 12-year-old Severin Suzuki speaking at an Agenda 21 conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; they saw that children could speak at adult events and be heard and listened to. It emboldened us all; it was taken as an imprimatur for making 'Youth Voice' the centrepiece of Millennium Kids.

Youth comprise nearly 30 per cent of the world's population. The involvement of today's youth in environment and development decision-making and in the implementation of programmes is critical to the long-term success of Agenda 21 (UN 1992).

Sponsors and corporate support was sought from around the city. Five young people, their parents and I met around a table every weekend for months to design the first youth led *Kids Helping Kids* Environmental Conference. Kids set the agenda, planned the activities and guided the program. We workshopped how to approach local members of parliament to get support for projects and how to write letters to the local newspaper. We explored how the river and our transport systems had changed over time. We talked about waste and pollution and the things that mattered to kids. We had workshops and site visits.

At the first conference in 1996 180 children raised their concerns and needs. Trees, native animals, air quality, transport, energy, water, waste, and peace and lifestyle were their greatest concerns. They not only identified the issues they considered important but they also listed appropriate actions. They put their recommendations for change into a document titled *Children's Youth Challenges on the Environment*. They invited the local Member of Parliament to be our voice in Parliament. The conference was opened by the Premier and closed by the Minister for the Environment.

The Kids conference concept was validated internationally. The Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program in 1996, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, said:

Kids Helping Kids is a conference unique in its vision and unusual in its scope. For far too long we have denied ourselves the opportunity of listening to our children, of heeding to their pleas for a better world, for a healthy environment, their questionings and their answers.

The Kids' concerns were sent to government departments and the replies trickled in. One department asked for a meeting.

Walk, ride, catch a bus to school was on the Kids' agenda as a challenge to improve traffic congestion issues around schools and to keep local air clean. State government officers asked the kids how they thought travel behaviour to school could be improved. TravelSmart to School was launched in 1997 with young people at the helm.

Rather than adults writing the curriculum for kids, young people were given the problem to solve. They were asked to identify ways to reduce car use for getting students to and from school. The Kids gathered and collated baseline data through surveys and individual passports that recorded travel behaviour to and from school. They developed fun and interactive play ideas to engage other students, they developed their own radio commercials and posters. They identified constraints, barriers and solutions, and engaged with stakeholders.

Critically, the program wasn't just interested in participant numbers, it was interested in behaviour change. A 10% reduction in car use to school was set as the target. The program was a game changer. It highlighted the difference between learning and behaviour change. From this point forward behaviour change was a consideration in designing all program and projects. These were exciting times but we underestimated how stubborn adults can be, and their ability to appear to listen and not hear or act. The big question from this time was: what actually changed when youth voice and engagement were embedded in the curriculum framework? There were highs and there were lows.

The lows:

- The keynote speaker for the first Kids conference pulled out a few weeks before the conference, reinforcing how seriously the kids voice was taken.
- Government Ministers played politics with a Kids event

The highs:

- The Kids wanted more, they were committed.
- Millennium Kids was incorporated in 1999 with a Youth Board central to the decision-making processes of the organisation.
- The *Kids Helping Kids* conference ran for 8 years, from 1996 to 2003, with hundreds of young people from local, regional and global communities coming together in WA to share and pitch ideas, shape youth-led local change and shape the future environmental education agenda.
- The Kids realized that advocacy was nothing without action.
- Behaviour change was on the agenda.

Developing flagship projects and the triple bottom line

Triple bottom line theory expands conventional business success metrics to include an organization's contributions to social well-being, environmental health, and a just economy. These bottom line categories are often referred to as the three "P's": people, planet, and prosperity (Elkington, 1997).

Millennium Kids embraced the triple bottom line idea, albeit a little unconventionally. The Millennium Kids triple bottom line (3BL) became: 1. have fun (indicated we were looking after people), 2. eat chocolate (an analogue for prosperity) and 3. care for the environment. This triple bottom line made the kids giggle but it has served Millennium Kids well because in all this we need to look after each other and embrace the fun in the world. When working with kids fun must never be forgotten.

Millennium Kids went from strength to strength as an incorporated not-for-profit. The budget allowed for paid staff for the first time, funded through income from sponsorship and grants. School communities were encouraged and supported to adopt bushland adjacent to or a short walk from their school. Trees were grown

and planted. Partnerships were developed with local government in the city and the bush, and programs were expanded to plant trees on farms. As the education landscape changed, so did Millennium Kids. Environmental education was embedded in the sustainability curriculum and Millennium Kids' ability to link and communicate between different agencies, levels of government and others maintained relevance.

At the 2001 conference a postgraduate student, Suzanne Johnson, interviewed the young attendees as part of her research toward her thesis titled "The Children's Voice: Their concerns and search for a role in influencing the Environment". Johnson's findings noted children's concerns relating to waste, forests and forestry practices, native flora, native animals, energy and consumption of non-renewable resources, pollution, oceans, global warming, salinity and commitment to the environment. Millennium Kids' participants have continued to share these concerns over the years.

The Conference Kids told Johnson they wanted to be more 'hands on' to improve the environment, and they wanted an active role to help spread the environmental message. They also wanted to have an influential role in environmental education but, more than anything, they wanted to be heard. Overwhelmingly, kids told her they were not being listened to. They felt their ideas had low credibility with decision makers, that they had little influence, and they were seen as inexperienced and incapable. Essentially, they felt powerless in an adult world.

These conversations drove the 'skills for life' youth voice and engagement methodology that Millennium Kids applies to this day. Millennium Kids had to get a lot smarter about empowering children and to find and make ways to integrate with key programs, projects, agencies and services. Millennium Kids influenced curriculum and policy and mainstreamed youth voice, but traction was still limited and it was difficult to get up-take in some cases. There were highs and lows.

The lows

- Seeing school bushland get bowled over for development
- Some good projects and bush sites were abandoned because of lack of leadership following teacher replacement or burnout.

The highs

- Millennium Kids designed the first Clean Up Australia curriculum for schools, embedded in surveys of waste and ways to reduce waste at school.
- Building on behaviour change principles the team had input on activities and ideas that would encourage young people to make sustainable change with waste behaviours around schools.
- In a partnership between the Ministries of Environment and Education at federal and state levels a sustainability education framework was developed.
- A child 8 years old held her primary school to account. With a petition signed by her peers in hand she called on the adults to listen to kids. Plans to bowl over a cricket pitch and cut down trees to build a carpark were aborted after a lot of strategic advocacy, a community education campaign and consultation program.
- Millennium Kids was mentioned in *We are the Weather Makers* (Flannery, 2006)
- The Commissioner for Children and Young People was appointed in WA.
- Millennium Kids was contracted to develop partnerships with youth voice and engagement as the centre piece for understanding youth issues (but none of them centred on the key concerns of children about the state of the environment).
- In 2010 Millennium Kids funded two representatives from WA who joined the Australian NGO *Child's Rights* Steering Group in Geneva to put climate change on the agenda.

To thine own self be true

In 2019 youth voice had to take a different direction. Kids were tired of voicing their concerns and being sidelined with photo opportunities but no action. The global youth strike movement had begun. Kids took to the streets, with some Millennium Kids included, in a global movement in protest of not being listened to. About this time the Millennium Kids' Youth Board learnt of the divestment movement (Ayling & Gunningham, 2015) and were

asking questions about meaningful partnerships. They asked ‘where are we getting our funding?’ ‘What do our sponsors stand for?’ and “Do they take climate change seriously?’ ‘What are our sponsors actually doing?’ It was time to review what Millennium Kids stood for.

The Youth Board wanted a more transparent and strategic approach to partnerships and decided to quietly forgo corporate sponsorship for a time and to reclaim its values. The Governing Council agreed. Was there a downside? It was quickly discovered that alternative grant and philanthropic avenues are extremely limited and very competitive. The staff of five reduced to one part-time person.

There are a lot of pathways to change and different strategies work for different people. Millennium Kids built a new engagement model that celebrated the synergies of education, behaviour change, innovation and design, advocacy, community action, and rules and regulations. Millennium Kids sought ways for young participants to steer their passion projects in ways that suited them. Every child who now joins the program is invited to pitch a project to develop a real-world solution to a real-world challenge. They decide how they want to activate their project. This is the 1000 Actions for the Planet Toolkit, with the projects registered with the UN against the Strategic Development Goals.

Refusing to be greenwashed has clarified why Millennium Kids does what it does. It has been hard, but it has made Millennium Kids more strategic and efficient. When the Kids won the National Banksia Award in 2020 they were asked how such a small organisation has achieved so much.

The lows

- That Kids needed to take corporations and governments to the courts to safeguard their future.

The highs

- Kids took a class action against the Federal Minister for Environment, arguing that the Minister had a duty of care to protect young people from climate change, and that this needed to be a consideration in approval processes for projects that would produce greenhouse gas. The Kids win was overturned on appeal but they certainly started a conversation.
- Abby, the Millennium Kids’ Chairperson’s daughter, came running down the stairs clutching a copy of *The Power of Positive Pranking* (Amoore, 2022) after Christmas in 2021. We knew she had stumbled on some pretty cool news. Author Nat Amoore had referred to the Millennium Kids website in her book – to inspire young people to make positive change in the environment.
- I was invited to join a UNESCO Future of Education round table. The world of education is changing to focus on real world skills for real work challenges and the Millennium Kids process was on the agenda. Millennium Kids processes were recognised by a global audience of future-thinking educators.

Future thinking

In 2017 all Millennium Kids programs were reviewed by 100 young people at a 3-day conference. Deforestation, waste and climate change were again the top three challenges. The conference focussed on futures thinking and the bold ideas to create a vision for 2050 and plan a pathway to get there. The Kids thought what needed to be done was obvious and spent time setting the agenda. The Youth Board designed 3 major projects that responded to these collective concerns of young people. To support these projects Millennium Kids rebuilt the website, with an 11-year-old as project manager, and began two major new projects.

Agents of Climate Change

To tackle climate change the Youth Board stepped up in their advocacy role and attended more meetings with decision makers. At the beginning of the pandemic, frustrated at the lack of climate action education in schools, they voted unanimously to co-design a deliberative democracy program that had climate education and action at its core. They trained with Prof Janette Hartz Karp for 18 months through online and face to face sessions. They trialled their program across the state and reviewed it based on youth feedback. The *Agents of Climate Change* program was born.

The Agents of Climate Change program profiles science-based and empowering resources for teachers. Students get to explore climate challenges, discuss the big issues, and ask the big questions of experts. They get to deliberate, exchange ideas, and pitch ideas for local change. Their recommendations are presented to stakeholders and selected projects receive funding and support to make them real. The program is currently funded by the United States Government (via the US Consul in WA) and some WA local governments. The youth message is clear:

We are representatives from Millennium Kids who are concerned about the delivery of education around climate change issues particularly for young people.

We need better ways to empower young people – not just teacher directed projects and one-hour lessons on climate change that leave us anxious and disempowered. We want more programs where youth research and create solutions to climate change showcasing their innovative thinking. We need 21st century skills to tackle real work issues preparing us as future thinkers and changemakers (Millennium Kids Youth Board, June 2023).

Green Lab

Children as young as seven have contacted Millennium Kids at times over matters like the felling of black cockatoo foraging trees. Kids understand the connection between trees and birds. They know birds need feeding trees as well as nesting trees. They know the birds have adapted to urbanisation and land-use change and now forage on non-native species. They know canopy cools the planet.

The Green Lab program was born out of these contacts and of community frustration at the ongoing loss of tree canopy across Perth's metropolitan area. Bushland continues to be cleared for new school buildings and sporting facilities. Revegetation programs are declining because of lack of monitoring or succession planning. Resources are being wasted, conservation assets are deteriorating, and dedicated teachers are not getting essential strategic direction and support. Needing all stakeholders to work together to increase canopy to cool our city seems so obvious.

Councils are including school canopy cover when they map canopy areas across their municipalities, and clearly schools have a pivotal role in protecting, monitoring and increasing canopy. A youth-led program could drive protection, monitoring and increasing canopy on school sites across cities in partnership with all stakeholders. In 2020 Green Lab won a state Natural Resources Management Grant to develop a three-year pilot program. Learnings from the previous 20 years were brought to the table, we learned more and had some wins. A positive precedent was set when a local government and a primary school collaborated and signed a 15-year lease agreement to protect and maintain the school's bushland. Another school removed an asphalt basketball court and planted an outdoor classroom.

Millennium Kids built their new website to host school projects, to track change, to showcase a series of Green Lab case studies and highlight their innovation to inspire teachers, students and others. Millennium Kids is currently designing a Green Lab 5 Star Rating system to acknowledge and potentially reward schools – i.e. a school incentives program. The rating system will consider criteria like whether bushland education is included in all classes, whether bushland protection embedded in school strategic plans, whether new principals will be selected based on their support for sustaining established environmental education practices, projects and assets, and whether students are heard on environmental issues and given due regard and support in decision making and project implementation.

Working with Noongar Elders and their community Millennium Kids is researching the stories and names for the area and building cross-curricular opportunities through the Caring for Country Framework. The kids want to activate a conversation across Perth during the 2024 Western Australian Tree Festival.

The lows

- The world is getting hotter
- Perth has the lowest canopy coverage of any major city in Australia
- Use of the term *global warming* has progressed through to *climate change* and *climate crisis* and now *global boiling* is being discussed

The highs

- The Kids keep coming and they are getting louder.
- Watching current flagship projects, Green Lab, 1000 Actions for the Planet, and Agents of Climate Change come to life.
- Perth's local government authorities are engaging with young people through the Agents of Climate Change program as part of their Climate Change and Energy Transformation Strategy.
- The Royal Automobile Club (RAC) of WA has invited the Kids to codesign and lead a youth leadership program that focuses on sustainable change in their organisation.
- The link between climate anxiety and the mental health of young people is finally on the agenda

Conclusion

Since 1995 young people have achieved and grown through Millennium Kids. Millennium Kids has always had a multi-stakeholder model. Starting as a little independent group working alone, trying to influence change for the environment, Millennium Kids is now part of a global collective. The Kids use their iPhones to find precedents around the world that support their ideas. They are networked and active and bolder. They influence the global collective and they bring global messaging back home to use. Youth Board member Amelia has worked with hundreds of young people around the world to lead the development of the MOCK COP Youth Statement on Climate Education which she will present at COP 28 in Dubai in December 2023. Alumni now fill roles in government, corporations, in leadership roles locally, regionally and globally and they report back from around the world.

Programs now feature youth-led voice and engagement at local, regional and international level. Millennium Kids has its own version of the circular economy. Green Lab is gaining increasing recognition. The World Economic Forum awarded the project a Top14 Global Innovator Award. A Green Lab member, Aelwen Johnstone, has been invited to speak at the Second World Forum on Urban Forests in Washington, DC in October 2023 - the only young person invited to speak. Back home, the kids still want their river back. They want the freeway underground and an avenue of trees, with plants for birds and insects.

In 2023 the world is shouting "*Humanity depends on the boundless energy, ideas and contributions of youth everywhere. Today and every day, let's support and stand with young people in shaping a just and sustainable world, for people and planet.*" (Guterres, 2023). The children no longer use terms like 'challenges' or 'recommendations'. They are demanding. Are we listening? Do we hear them? Will we engage with them by providing meaningful, skill-building opportunities and will we support them by having them at the table? Will you be a role model for change? Will you put your own work under the microscope and claim your agency? Our kids depend on it!

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