

Green is the new black: Education for sustainable development in the early years

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Robert is the Preschool teacher at Campus Kindergarten, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. He has worked in a variety of Early Childhood settings in Australia and overseas for over 15 years. Throughout his life Robert has enjoyed a love and appreciation for the environment. He feels fortunate that he has the opportunity to incorporate his passion for the environment with his work in Early Childhood Education. As key teacher with overall responsibility for the Environmental Education projects at Campus Kindergarten, Robert works collaboratively with children, teachers and the community to embed sustainability ideals, concepts and actions into everyday life.

Green is the new black!

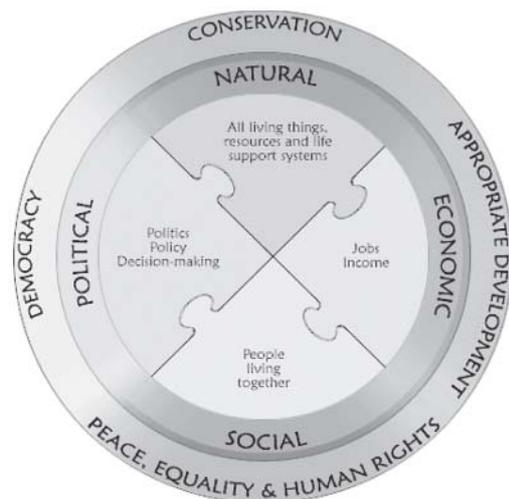
There is unquestionably a rising tide of awareness and interest with regards the state of the world's environment. The media is saturated with reports of global warming, pollution and associated health issues, deforestation, floods and drought; Al Gore's (2006) *An Inconvenient Truth* and the Stern Report (2006) out of the UK have both served to raise people's awareness. What does this mean for us as early childhood educators? As we enter the third year of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, it is timely that we ask ourselves – 'How do we 'ride this wave of interest' and capitalise on this unprecedented opportunity to engage children and families in life-changing educational experiences for the environment?' This paper serves to explore some possibilities and tells the story of one early childhood centre's approach to education for sustainable development.

Environmental Education, Education for Sustainability and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are some of the terms used to describe teaching practices for the environment. In the interests of consistency, and in keeping with terminology used by the peak international body, the United Nations, the term Education for Sustainable Development has been used in this article. Similarly, definitions used to describe sustainability vary greatly. The definition below is most closely aligned with the authors' philosophy.

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Bruntland Report 1987, p.8).

What is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)?

Diagram 1 describes a holistic approach to ESD. Four interdependent dimensions or systems of sustainability and their associated principles are identified:



Dimension of Sustainability ↔ Value Principle

Social Sustainability ↔ Peace and Equity

Ecological Sustainability ↔ Conservation

Economic Sustainability ↔ Appropriate Development

Political Sustainability ↔ Democracy

Diagram 1 (UNESCO, 2006)

the greater community. The community members' images, perceptions and understandings of one another, along with the core principles of rights, respect, trust and responsibility, and the approaches to teaching (fourth band from centre) influence all interactions and the development, content and implementation of the programs (fifth band). The teachings of the various theorists around the outside also permeate CK's culture.

This culture underpins all facets of Campus Kindy's operation and is clearly evident in the formulation and evolution of the centre's Sustainable Planet Project (SPP).

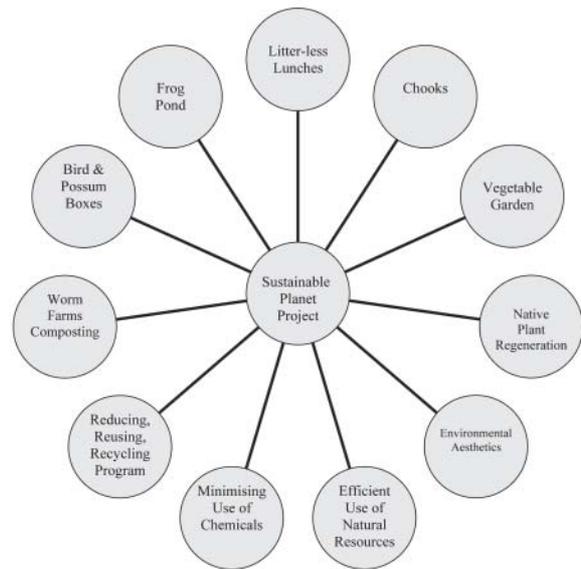
The Sustainable Planet Project

The title Sustainable Planet Project (SPP) is the term used to describe all elements of the CK curriculum pertaining to ESD and should not be considered as separate to the broader curriculum. Indeed the interconnected nature of its implementation could be considered an integral factor in the project's success.

The Sustainable Planet Project was born at a Campus Kindy staff professional development weekend in 1997. It was created to provide an opportunity for all members of the Campus community to contribute their own ideas, energy and interests, with the common goal of developing Campus Kindy's environmental education program. At the project's inception the teaching team developed their vision for the Sustainable Planet Project. It is our vision that:

Environmentally responsible practices become an integral part of our everyday lives. Simply 'what we do', not something we do because we think we should (Campus Kindy teachers, 1997).

As the Sustainable Planet Project evolved, the teachers, children and families began working on a number of projects. These have included:



All of these 'green' projects are integral components of the Sustainable Planet Project and have now become part of the everyday practices at Campus Kindy as envisaged at the project's inception. Each addresses ecological issues. They could be described as the 'tangible' elements of CK's approach to ESD.

However, as demonstrated in Diagram 1, a holistic approach to ESD must also consider the other three dimensions of sustainability: Social, Political and Economic. Elements such as democracy, equality, co-construction, critical reflection, immersion/connections, empowerment and active citizenship, all present in CK's culture, address some of the issues apparent in these dimensions of sustainability. These elements could be described as the 'intangible' elements of CK's approach to ESD. The following case study demonstrates some of these 'intangible' elements of CK's culture-in-action.

The Shopping Trolley Project

This project – outlined more fully in Davis et al (2005) – originated when the children arrived at the centre one morning to find a shopping trolley dumped in the playground, raising many questions about why and how it happened to be there. The preschoolers' initial brainstorming came up with the following ideas:

Feature Articles

Ryan: A burglar dressed up as a normal person, got the shopping trolley and took it to Campus Kindy.

Emily: He put it in there in the night and quickly ran away.

Teacher: Well what should we do about it?

John: Ring up.

Hamish: Take it back to the shop.

Fizza: Ring them and let them know.

("The Trolley" Documentation 2003)

The children were concerned not only about the morality of stealing, but also about the visual impact and damage that dumped trolleys and other rubbish have on the local environment. It was decided to write a letter to the 'Coles people', informing the store manager that their shopping trolley had been found and that there were more 'stolen' trolleys in the area. The children also listed ideas for stopping such behaviour as well as offering to return the trolley to the store.

They also wanted to write to 'the burglars' expressing their concerns about their behaviour.

Dear trolley stealers.
We are ^{the} Campus kindy preschoolers.
This morning we found a trolley
in our garden. We also saw
one in a tree and in the lake.
We feel worried & angry.
Stop stealing trolleys because
it is not the right thing to do.
You are crossing the law.
You are going to go to jail
or you will get punished by
the judge or prime minister.
From the Campus kindy
preschooler.

Figure 1: Letter to the local newspaper (Campus Kindergarten preschoolers).

Not knowing their addresses, alternative ways of sending a letter were explored. In the end, a decision was made to write to the local newspaper in the hope that, with its local community readership, the burglars would read of their concerns.

Their story made front page news in this local newspaper, along with a photo story outlining the children's ethical and aesthetic concerns about stolen and dumped shopping trolleys. There was also editorial comment entitled 'Young teach us a worthwhile lesson', where the editor praised the children for their social responsibility.

With local attention adding momentum to the children's interest, a visit to the supermarket was then organised. During a tour of the car parks, the children identified that existing signs discouraging customers from taking shopping trolleys outside the shopping centre could only be read if customers actually utilised the car parks. However, the children had already determined that those who had 'borrowed' the trolleys were not car owners. Consequently, they suggested to the supermarket management that they (the children) make new signs which were then posted on the supermarket's main doors, targeting the 'shopping trolley thieves'.



Figure 2: Example of children's signage to the 'trolley thieves' (Alexander).

Although perhaps not a classically 'green' project with obvious ecological connections, this project does demonstrate how young children equipped with knowledge and skills and given the opportunity in a democratic classroom in which they feel valued and empowered, have the capacity to participate as active citizens. The processes involved and outcomes attained through this project potentially address all four dimensions of sustainability:

- Ecological: less pollution (i.e. discarded trolleys) in the local environment
- Social: collaboration and connections with local community
- Political: builds democracy, active citizenship
- Economic: the 'trolley stealers' stop stealing trolleys.

Conclusion

At the inception of the SPP, the teachers recognized the importance for children to be actively engaged in learning experiences that would promote the development of sound environmentally sustainable practices. They set about developing a number of projects that would teach the children about environmental issues and develop skills for improving the environment. These have been identified as the tangible elements of the SPP. However, over a period of time, through processes of critical reflection, professional development and research, the intangible elements of Campus Kindy culture were recognised as equally important for the success of the SPP. Elements such as social justice, democracy and active citizenship – present in the Campus Kindy

culture and enacted in the programs – have enabled the members of the Campus Kindy community to engage in a holistic approach to education for sustainable development. As early childhood educators, it is our responsibility to reflect upon our practices. This involves exploring possibilities in our programs for engaging children, not only in the tangible 'green' experiences, but also in investigating opportunities for creating the "new black" - a vision of ESD that creates cultures that empower children to work together for a healthy and sustainable planet – now and for future generations.

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