



## ***Sustainable leadership***

***Leanne Hunter and Lisa Sonter***

Leanne Hunter and Lisa Sonter are both recipients of Community Merit Awards (National Excellence in Teaching Awards) for Leadership and Innovation in Early Childhood Teaching Methods. In this interview Leanne and Lisa share their leadership capabilities as they reflect on the journey of introducing sustainable practices to their preschool.

### ***Do you see yourself as a leader?***

As early childhood educators, we are challenged to take on a leadership role daily with children, families, administrators and other stakeholders. However, we often discount our leadership abilities. Sometimes, challenging the lens through which we view ourselves and others, enables us to see leadership potential and to feel more comfortable with the label of leader.

In fact, Rhonda Forrest's study of beginning directors in child care centres focuses on self-awareness. She suggests that

*becoming a leader involves the exploration of one's values and beliefs, which, in turn, informs leadership behaviours. (2002, 74)*

### ***Do people choose to be a leader or is it something that just happens?***

Taking on a leadership role is a choice. Sometimes an idea, a passion, or a niggle will be the stimulus for our desire to make a change. However, Wendy Lee (2011, 1) believes that leadership belongs to everyone. She states that

*using magic, being moral, creating merriment and mobilising others are all part of creating strong pedagogical leadership practices in early childhood settings ... Good leaders have a significant effect on the success of children in*

*education and, as teachers, we therefore all have an obligation to be good leaders ... Every teacher, child and parent has the right to be engaged in leadership.*

### ***As a leader, do you believe you have a role in supporting aspiring leaders?***

Working in teams is very much part of early childhood education. Supporting the leadership potential in others by mentoring and building their knowledge, confidence and capacity can only strengthen and improve learning possibilities for adults and children.

### ***Describe how you lead?***

Being an effective leader requires you also to be a good follower. Yu, Cox and Sims (2006, 378)

*believe that the empowering leader emphasizes follower self-influence, rather than providing followers with orders and commands; leads others to influence themselves to achieve high performance and that followers themselves are an influential source of wisdom and direction.*

***Being a leader or follower is not a permanent either/or way of being. We may be leaders in some situations but that doesn't always define our position. We make choices.***

**What's stopping you or someone else taking on a leadership role? Is it situational? Are you controlled by others or is it a self-imposed restraint? Is it confidence?**

To answer that question I would like to draw on the wisdom of the Dalai Lama. He is considered by many to be an inspirational leader who has insights about confidence. He believes that

*true leaders have the ability to look at an issue from many perspectives and, based on that expanded view, to make the right decisions. They have a calm, collected, and concentrated mind, undisturbed by negative thoughts and emotions, trained and focused.*

He further explains that if your mind is influenced by anger, jealousy, fear, or lack of self-confidence you become disturbed and inefficient. He provided the following advice.

*Lack of self-confidence is a waste of time because it does not contribute to finding the right solutions. To combat this, leaders must apply the concept of dependent origination in everyday life. This means that all factors, considering consequences both short-term and long-term from different perspectives, must be taken into account when making decisions. Once those in charge start thinking in this interconnected way, they feel the rightness of their decision and self-confidence builds from there. (Dalai Lama & Van Den Muyzenberg 2008, 33)*

**Can you share your leadership in action when introducing sustainability practices?**

Leading the process of embedding sustainable practices at Mitchelton Pre-Schooling Centre has and continues to be a journey with its own highs and lows, trials and celebrations. This has been a relatively recent



*Opportunities to connect with the natural environment.*

journey for us although some staff members have a longstanding interest in the environment and have been dabbling for many years in improving our natural environment. This is challenging, as our playground is quite small.

We strive to make the best use of what we have to provide space, time and materials to ensure children have opportunities to be connected with the natural environment.

We take moments as they arise to appreciate the visiting wildlife. Over time, water conservation and grant applications for water tanks became another focus as well as looking at other sustainable practices such as recycling and energy saving.



*Gardening in small spaces.*



*Appreciate visiting wildlife.*

*Knowledge and enthusiasm were shared as various staff members attended conferences and workshops. We formally and informally looked at our environment through a 'green' lens which enabled our shared vision to solidify.*



*Interest in the environment.*

### ***How do you both sustain yourselves as leaders?***

Each year we are provided with challenges in sustaining passion and leadership. The year began with many ideas and projects to continue our journey with sustainability. Parents were invited to join an environment and sustainability group. Ideas grew and action was taken. However as the year unfolded, I was disappointed with my own progress as other pressing matters were taking my head space.

### ***How do you manage this? Do you reflect upon it?***

Yes, I asked myself questions. For example, were our sustainable practices continuing or stalling? Was this just me or were others thinking the same? I was reminded of the parallel dilemma when looking at supporting some children's play. If I step out, will the play continue? Do all players in the scenario have the skills, motivation and confidence to continue? Similarly, if I step away from a lead role with sustainable practices, will they continue?

It was a time for reflection and a dose of reality! It was a time to seek some thoughts from other stakeholders. Firstly I asked the children who clearly expressed ways we 'help to save our earth'. We added their words and drawings to a wall panel and asked parents to add their thoughts. Staff members also kindly responded to a quick survey to gauge their understanding of where we were and where we might go.

### ***What did you learn through this process?***

- To take time to reflect. As Kathleen Noonan once reported,

*Do not now look for the answers ... At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.*

- To accept the natural ebb and flow of projects. Be realistic!
- To see what we have achieved rather than be overwhelmed by what we still wanted to achieve. We now have better processes



Childrens ideas to help save our earth.

for sharing information with parents; a sustainability management plan; and commitment to our shared vision.

- To celebrate the truly amazing shift towards embedding sustainable thinking and practices with children and adults.



Sharing information with families

- To acknowledge the ripple effect of young children's influences within their own families.
- To recognise the gradual shift to team leadership where different team members take a lead role depending on the idea, project and passion.
- To accept that our sustainability journey is ongoing, fluid and multi-directional and that moving towards our shared vision, regardless of pace, is still moving forward.

*To look is one thing. To see what you look at is another. To understand what you see is a third. To learn from what you understand is still something else. But to act on what you learn is all that really matters.*  
Talmud

**... and finally you are about to release a new book.**

Yes, we are excitedly looking forward to the release of our book *Progressing Play: Practicalities, intentions and possibilities in emerging co-constructed curriculum*. It is in press as we speak. Readers can find out more by going to our website at [www.consultantsatplay.com](http://www.consultantsatplay.com)

## References

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