

The Sustainable Planet Project: Creating Cultural Change at Campus Kindergarten

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December 2002 saw the United National General Assembly officially endorse the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), an initiative emphasising the indispensability of education in achieving sustainable ways of living. To contribute to this important international program, Campus Kindergarten, a community kindergarten and preschool, and long day care centre, collaborated with researchers from the School of Early Childhood at QUT to research and report on their *Sustainable Planet Project*. An account of this study has just been published in the *Handbook of Sustainability Research*, designed to stimulate further research activity for the Decade. This feature article gives a snapshot of the project and what was learned.

The *Sustainable Planet Project* originated in 1997, the outcome of a staff team-building exercise to encourage home/work linkages in this long day care centre. In seeking a shared project, 'the environment' emerged as a common interest. Under the *Sustainable Planet Project* banner, individual staff members were able to add value to their roles as early childhood educators by including personal interests such as gardening, wildlife conservation and recycling. From the start, the project had an action-oriented focus, encapsulated in its sub-title "Saving our planet: become a conscious part of the solution".

Initially, centre staff worked with the children on a number of small-scale, mini-projects allied to their own particular environmental interests. These have included:

So what are we doing?

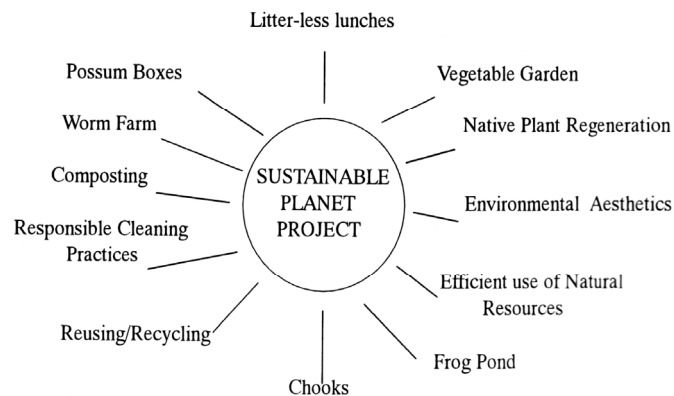


Figure 1: Initial mini-projects in the *Sustainable Planet Project* (Campus Kindergarten teachers, 1997)

At times, there were periods of high energy. At times, individuals lost interest and momentum. There were periods when little was happening as other events, projects and priorities took precedence. Nevertheless, despite the ups and downs, all these mini-projects have become inculcated into everyday routines at the centre and new projects are continually added. It could be said that the centre now has an ‘environmental ethic’ where sustainability has become part of the centre’s culture and where environmentally-friendly thinking and behaviours permeate all aspects of the life of Campus Kindergarten. This ethic supports a view that even young children can be proactive participants in educational and environmental decision making - as initiators, provocateurs, researchers, communicators and activists. This is exemplified in the following vignette of a recent *Sustainable Planet Project* sub-project.

The Shopping Trolley Project

This originated when the children discovered a shopping trolley dumped in the centre’s playground, raising many questions about why and how it got there. Preschoolers’ brainstorming came up with these possibilities:

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.

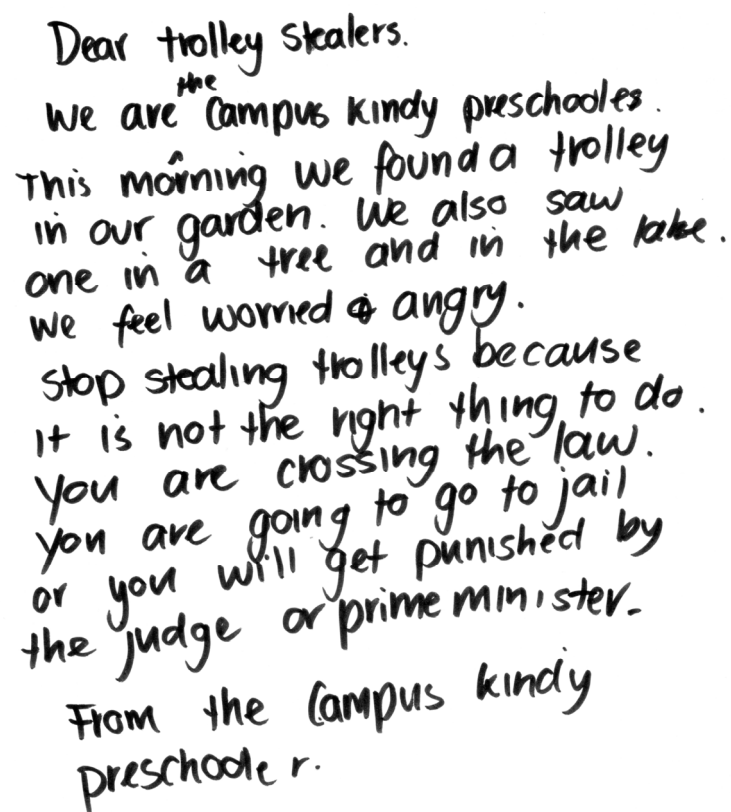
Teacher: Well what should we do about it?

John: Ring up.

Hamish: Take it back to the shop.

Fizza: Ring them and let them know.

As the children were concerned with both the morality of 'stealing' and the impact of dumped trolleys on the local environment, it was decided to write a letter to the 'Coles people' informing them that their shopping trolley had been found and that there were more 'stolen' trolleys in the area. The children also offered to return the trolley to the store. They also wanted to communicate directly with 'the burglars' but, not knowing their addresses, explored alternative ways of reaching them. Ultimately, a decision was made to write to the local newspaper in the hope that, with its local readership, the perpetrators would read of their concerns.



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 2: Letter to the supermarket (Campus Kindergarten preschoolers).

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

This attention, adding momentum to the children’s interest, led to a supermarket visit. During the car park tour the children identified that existing signage, designed to discourage customers from removing trolleys from the area, could only be read if shoppers actually utilised the car parks. The children, however, had already determined that those who ‘borrowed’ the trolleys were not car owners. Consequently, they made new signs, targeting the ‘trolley thieves’, which were then posted on the supermarket’s main doors. Coles also changed their policy and now include their signage in other locations.



Figure 3: Example of children’s signage to the ‘trolley thieves’ (Alexander).

This vignette illustrates that even very young children can learn to ‘make a difference’ when teachers create an empowering, child-centred curriculum that promotes social responsibility and active citizenship. Furthermore, through all the activities in the *Sustainable Planet Project* over the years, there have been a range of tangible environmental outcomes which have considerably reduced the centre’s ‘environmental footprint’. These include:

- enhanced natural play spaces and improved biodiversity;
- reductions in environmentally-harmful kitchen and cleaning products;
- water conservation through installation of a sandpit water barrel, filled only once a day;
- introduction of the ‘litterless lunch’ to minimise packaged foods;

- development of a composting and worm farm system for food scraps; and, overall,
- major reductions in waste from 2 wheelie bins/day to 1/2 bin/day.

Creating a culture of change

This study illustrates that creating deep level cultural change within an organisation – in this case a transition to sustainable practices - has been an evolutionary process, advancing incrementally and erratically over almost a decade. Recent organisational change theory (emerging from a branch of chaos theory identified as complexity theory) tells us that this kind of change is typical within a *complex* organisational system. (Complex systems include climates, the brain, and institutions such as schools and childcare centres. They differ fundamentally from those that are *complicated* but can be fully understood through knowledge of their components, such as clocks and computers).

Change based in complexity does not create order and predictability. Rather, it is more likely to lead to messy, unpredictable, seemingly chaotic conditions for an organisation. Success precipitates new challenges, new learning, and further change. Instability, rather than stability, is therefore ‘normal’ for dynamic, complex organisations with creative solutions arising out of interactions developed under conditions of uncertainty, diversity and instability. Profound change in an organisation, then, is much more likely to be slowly-emerging cultural change coming from within the organisation, rather than revolutionary change that sweeps away the old and ushers in the new.

According to Fullan (2003), an international authority on educational reform based on complexity, there are just a small number of factors that help an organisation create significant change within their own complex system. These are evident at Campus kindergarten.

- Start with a moral purpose, ethical dilemma or desirable direction. At Campus Kindergarten, these included a desire for work/life balance and concern for the environment. These are context specific, not imposed from outside.
- Create a collaborative learning culture where team work and mentoring become normal social practices. At Campus Kindergarten, children, staff, and parents, are all part of a learning community which supports interactive learning in groups.

- Ensure that informed, reflective practice infuses interactions and deliberations. Problems are more communicative obstacles to creativity, rather than issues to be overcome in order to re-establish stability and order.
- Consolidate ‘small wins’ and build on them to scale up their impacts. This is the ‘butterfly effect’ sometimes associated with chaos theory.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted how the Campus Kindergarten community has confronted the challenge of sustainability. It has done this by creating a ‘learning organisation’ where a culture of sustainability is continuously recreated by taking advantage of, rather than resisting, the natural power of complexity. This centre is a model of quality early childhood education for sustainability, and an exemplar for us all.

References

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