

Bringing It All Together: Partnerships, Holisms and Futures

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It is my belief that one of the greatest tasks for society is to equip children with the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to change current thinking and patterns of action to ensure long-term healthy, just and sustainable futures. Reading the three “Stories from practice” reinforced for me the different ways in which individuals and organisations, particularly schools, can ‘make a difference’ and can contribute to sustainability. As I reread the accounts above it became obvious that there were connecting themes within these stories which tell about innovative environmental education practices. I have collected these themes under the following headings: creating partnerships; thinking holistically; educating for the future.

Creating partnerships

*‘these stories highlight the importance of
creating effective and collegial relationships’*

Without doubt each of these stories highlights the importance of creating effective and collegial relationships of the kind which provide enhanced meaning to the lives of individuals, schools and their constituents, and the wider community. In increasingly complex local and global environments, the capacity of schools and their teachers to ‘deliver the goods’ for children is becoming a more and more difficult task. Expectations of providing ‘the basics’—learning to read, to write and to use numbers—have been added to over the years by demands for new content, new curriculum practices and new organisational structures. These changing expectations of teachers and of schools are emerging in an environment of declining government financial support for education and a general unwillingness of the community to pay higher taxes. With capital demands also increasing in schools—for new technologies and better buildings—where will schools find the capacity to create those ‘special places’ where children feel socially and physically comfortable, where the grounds are an additional, outdoor classroom and where children learn to become ‘stewards of the Earth’? There is a limit to how much seating, how much paving or how many plants a school can

purchase from the proceeds of a lamington drive!

It is imperative, then, that school communities wishing to engage in redeveloping their grounds reach out to the local community, as Chatswood Hills State School has done. Not only are the benefits the obvious ones, like achieving a much more physically and socially attractive play and learning environment for children and teachers, but schools reaps many more benefits in being recognised as outward thinking and integrated parts of their communities. Where are there local councils—such as the Logan City Council—which have a commitment to environmental education, to environmental action and to fostering networks and partnerships and which will assist schools draw on the extensive resources in their immediate region to help them achieve their educational and environmental goals? Obviously, Chatswood Hills School in its quite short life has built up enormous amounts of goodwill within its school community, with local environment groups and with local and state politicians in order to create the environment it wants. As it now turns its school grounds from ‘landscaping’ to ‘learnscape’, there are lessons for us all in being pro-active for change. Success breeds success through working together!

Thinking holistically

Discussion for this second theme is built on personal experience and wide reading about the development and application of change processes that are built upon holistic thinking. As Bill Lucas says in his story “involv(e) the whole site, the whole community and all aspects of curricula”. Transforming school grounds into environmental, social and educational ‘learnscape’ requires thinking that makes connections between different spaces and existing usages. Holistic thinking creates new potentials for interactions between children, adults and their environments.

Of major importance in these processes is the recognition of the curriculum possibilities of school grounds. It is my perception that, in Australia at least, considerable energy is being expended in the physical redevelopment of school grounds, particularly in relation to the enhancement of the informal and hidden aspects of school curricula focussing on lunch times and playtimes, but that there is much less activity in making the links to schools’ formal curricula. The staff at Chatswood Hills School are to be commended for their curriculum plans and actions which overtly facilitate children’s learning in the outdoors by implementing integrated, cross-curricular teaching and learning approaches. Their holistic thinking is of critical importance to the success of their environmental education initiatives. By providing educational opportunities for children, teachers and the wider community to learn in, about and for the environment, they are also ensuring the long-term sustainability of the gardens, habitats and the ‘classrooms’ they have created.

‘sustainable solutions require long-term thinking, planning and actions’

All three “stories from practice” show that the council, the school and the Learning through Landscapes Trust hold values that embrace “futures thinking”. They recognise that sustainable solutions require long-term planning and actions in which education holds the key. As an environmental educator, I find this commitment to education for creating better environments both now and for the future indeed heartening. The Learning through Landscapes Trust, as an advocacy group for better educational environments and better education has embarked on a long-term commitment to school change. Their influence is being felt in many schools in Britain and in Australia. Indeed, involvement in the grounds developments at my own children’s school was strongly influenced by a Learning through Landscapes video I first viewed in 1991. Of course one should not be surprised that the school community at Chatswood Hills, because it is a school, values education for the future—though it is often dismaying that many schools don’t, or more probably, haven’t yet worked out how to put their aspirations for better futures into practice! Chatswood Hills School’s program and Logan City Council’s investment in school and community education are both significant examples of futures-oriented practice.

Final words

When reading these three stories, however, it must be remembered that what has been written are not blue-prints for change. In the end, each school, setting, community and organisation has to mark out its own best ways towards sustainability. What these practical stories do show, though, is that when interests and concerns are harnessed for collective and positive action, significant changes can be made. It’s a matter of being, as Alice Walker wrote in *The Temple of My Familiar*, “conscious to keep in mind the present you are constructing. It should be the future you want.” ☺

Julie Davis lectures in the School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education at the Qld University of Technology. Her interests in the development of awareness about environmental issues and environmental education in early childhood education are expressed in her preservice teacher education work. Her research interests are in participatory action research, particularly ‘whole school/centre’ approaches to environmental education, including the intersection of the work of ‘health promoting schools’, futures studies and environmental education.
