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Global and local intersects - ECEfS in Australia

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on local and global intersects with implications for early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) in Australia. At the TND8 public lecture, I shared our excitement in Australia about a new sustainability principle in the recently updated Early Years Learning Framework (AGDE, 2022). We join a handful of countries globally that now explicitly include sustainability in their early childhood curricula, however we must ask what next to drive ECEfS implementation across the Australian early childhood education field. We do this in the somewhat unique context of Australia being highly prone to climate change events, but also a so-called 'lifeboat' island nation in the face of climate change. A somewhat perplexing context for us all that has implications for urgent ECEfS implementation.

A new principle

The recently updated Belonging, being and becoming: Early years learning framework for Australia (AGDE, 2022) incorporates a new sustainability principle. This has been a pivotal milestone in Australia after several decades of advocacy by local professional networks and the long-standing international contributions of

Australian researchers (Elliott, Årlemalm-Hagsér & Davis, 2020; Davis, 2009; Dymont et al., 2013; Emery et al., 2017; O’Gorman, 2017). Particularly when one considers barely a decade ago a shortsighted Australian Productivity Commission Review (2014) removed a sustainability standard from the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2013) based on arguments it was too subjective, not integral to the quality of EC services and not being well addressed by EC services anyway. We seem to bob about forever among the waves of changing political priorities in both early childhood education and sustainability.

The updated framework acknowledges the challenges facing ‘humanity and the planet we share with all living things’ and identifies educators and children as having ‘important and active roles to play in creating and promoting sustainable communities’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 17). These sentiments are supported by a multi-dimensional definition of sustainability comprising intertwined environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Somewhat predictably, the framework fell short of recognising a political dimension; however, it does cite ‘children’s agency and their right to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 18).

One notable challenge for implementation is the limited elaboration of the sustainability principle across the five learning outcomes. A broader coverage beyond the readily identifiable ‘Learning Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 38) is required to embed whole service approaches to sustainability as long advocated (Davis, 2015). In addition, previous Australian research has identified early childhood educator limitations around sustainability content knowledge and pedagogical approaches (Dymont et al., 2013; Elliott et al., 2016); hence, guidance is essential for effective implementation. Amidst these challenges, I now turn to the global intersect that compels us to act swiftly to ensure all educators are well equipped.

Global intersects

Several global scientific authorities have declared 2023 was the globally hottest year (NOAA, 2024). Specifically, Australia’s State of the Environment Report (Metcalf & Costello, 2021) reminds us that ‘Climate change and its impacts, in terms of changes in the frequency, intensity and distribution of extreme events, are key pressures on the persistence of Australian environments as we know them, with knock-on effects on society (p. 8). The report elaborates that extreme climate events including wildfire, drought, floods and heat waves are most often increasing in frequency across Australia’s sparsely populated island nation. Personally, I cannot escape the daily shifting media reports about fires to the west and floods to the north; yet, well recognize the global injustices of being somewhat comfortably located in a Western nation supposedly well-resourced to deal with these calamities. I also recognise those Australians speaking from raw and personal experiences would not necessarily agree.

The observed impacts of such events on young children have come to the fore in Australia; for example, a paediatrician described treating children for cuts or infections acquired during flood rescues, but also the need for medication to reduce post-trauma anxiety (Naylor, 2022). One child-focused initiative on offer is Birdie's Tree (Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health [QCPIMH], 2018), a suite of resources to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing for families, specifically during natural disasters. The realities of this situation reinforce the global calls to both recognize and address the links between climate change, children's rights and children's current and future wellbeing (Clark et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

A final global intersect is the notion of Australia being a contemporary 'lifeboat' nation in terms of preparedness and the capacity for resilience in the face of climate change. King and Jones (2021) examined this notion in detail and offer an alternative term 'nodes of persisting complexity'. These are defined as nations with 'favourable starting conditions' that may allow them to retain localised, higher levels of societal, technological and organisational complexity for promoting resilience and system change. They offer a global shortlist comprising Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Iceland and the UK, thus predominantly temperate developed island nations with lower population densities.

These three global intersects create a somewhat perplexing context for all engaged in the implementation of our new Australian sustainability principle. Not only do we deal with the physical realities of frequent climate change events for families and children, we must ameliorate any longer-term health and well-being impacts, and at the same time, instil preparedness and capacities for new and different ways of being in 'nodes of persisting complexity'.

Driving ECEfS implementation

With the above considerations in mind, I share some pragmatic thoughts on driving ECEfS implementation. Significantly, no funded resources are currently available from relevant government departments or authorities, yet the new sustainability principle is mandated from 2024 onwards and subject to on-site quality assurance assessment. I argue it is simply not enough to offer a new principle and expect informed educator uptake. Here I offer a checklist of possibilities and examples, only some are underway in Australia to date.

- Regulatory and quality assurance bodies promote understandings about ECEfS and priorities in the field, <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/latest-news/blog?f%5B0%5D=categories%3A1666>
- Professional standards and codes of conduct reflect an ethic of sustainability, <https://teachingcouncil.nz/professional-practice/our-code-our-standards/>
- Early childhood education stakeholders, such as management bodies and professional associations, demonstrate leadership through sustainability

position statements and policies, <https://g8education.edu.au/about-us/sustainability/>

- In-service professional learning offers varied accessible platforms, such as on-site mentors, webinars and learning circles (Elliott et al., 2016), <https://www.eeec.org.au/sustainability-alliance/>
- Designated centre-based sustainability champions are leaders in their communities supported by networks and mentors.
- Pre-service teacher education courses consistently include sustainability studies (Davis & Davis, 2020; Evans et al., 2022).
- A national ECEfS online repository offers a recognized and relevant source for educators, <https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/en/teaching-strategies-and-resources/contribution/education-for-a-climate-changing-future/>
- Research and practice informed publications support educators (Davis & Elliott, 2024)
- Sustainable building design and retrofitting exemplifies leading sustainable service infrastructure and offers learning opportunities.
- Research initiatives around implementation of the new sustainability principle and beyond promote evidence-based practice and deeper understandings.

Conclusion

Therefore, although we share much excitement about the new principle, the compelling global and local intersects and long checklist of pragmatic possibilities is perhaps overwhelming. Perhaps there are relatable possibilities here for other nations. Personally, at my late career stage, I leave this to others to grasp the ECEfS baton and run swiftly to facilitate young children as key players in creating global 'nodes of persisting complexity'.

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