Sustainability as the norm in early childhood settings

This article was written in the midst of extreme weather events and bushfires that are again reminding Australians that climate change is real; neither politicians, nor early childhood educators can ignore the imperative of sustainability.

As I and others have advocated (Davis, 2010), there is a unique opportunity in early childhood settings to culturally embed ‘thinking, acting and relating’ (Kemmis, 2009) for sustainability as integral to early childhood education. Children, educators and families must be active, empowered and collaborative participants in change towards more sustainable ways of being with the Earth.

While many services have engaged with practices such as establishing compost bins and water tanks, particularly driven by the new National Quality Standards (NQS) including Standard 3.3. ‘The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future’ (ACECQA, 2013, pp. 99–102), sustainability is more than ticking the boxes on a list of practices. The excerpt below from a case study of two early childhood centres entitled Baby steps for a greener future highlights how many practices became embedded over time and aspects that promote continuities in terms of ongoing relationships with educators, responsive and evolving programs and links with families and communities. Continuities in early childhood settings support a sense of security pivotal to facing challenges and taking risks and also offer deeper and more meaningful learning opportunities for children and their families.

Continuities are also foundational to understandings about sustainability and rethinking continuities to envision what sustainability might mean in an early childhood setting offers a different lens:

• How do we connect our past and future on the Earth, is there a sense of relationship continuity or discord between humans and the Earth over time?
• How do we understand the many ecological interrelationships that sustain the Earth and its inhabitants, are they secure, ongoing and most critically, mutually responsive?
• How do we respond to the current evolving period of significant global climatic transition we are now facing, are we responding in ways that promote continuity at all levels for all species?

It is particularly this last question that should propel all early childhood educators into action, envisioning sustainability in their services. Globally we are currently responding (or not in many cases) to the greatest climatic transition period humans and all other species will perhaps ever experience. We must question how we are working with children to promote the necessary understandings, relationships and sense of agency to respond effectively to significant climatic changes.

I reflect back to my earlier statement that sustainability is more than a checklist of practices. Sustainability must be envisioned as a critically important continuity within early childhood settings, from pedagogical relationships and strategies, learning experiences and physical contexts to service operation, philosophy statements and ethics. Aligning all of these elements with sustainability offers a clear and consistent message to all service participants that sustainability is the shared ‘norm’ in our service and guides all decision making. By rethinking continuity in this way, there is the possibility for a sense of security about the future and for the children we work with to effectively respond to the predicted challenges and risks of climatic transition over coming decades.