

Little Green Steps: Sustainability practice for early years comes to Western Australia

Elaine Lewis, AAEE-WA Member and Innovation Grant Co-ordinator at Coolbinia Primary School and Dr Jennifer Pearson, Convenor of AAEE-WA

Little Green Steps, a training workshop on education for sustainability for early years educators, was recently conducted by the Australian Association for Environmental Education – Western Australian Chapter (AAEE-WA). With a grant from the Waste Authority of Western Australia, AAEE-WA was able to provide professional learning for staff of childcare services, kindergartens and preschools. The purpose of the training was to encourage sustainable practice through zero waste policy and practical implementation of these practices for children, staff and parents. This training was developed by Lady Gowrie Child Centre in Sydney and the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water in New South Wales, and assisted in the setting up of the professional development component of Gosford City and Wyong Shire Councils' Little Green Steps Program. To increase national exposure to the program two days were offered in WA. Each day stood alone as a discrete training program.

The two training days were led by Helen Nippard, from Practical Solutions for Early Childhood Services (NSW), with the support of Dr Jennifer Pearson, Convenor of AAEE-WA, and Elaine Lewis, AAEE-WA member and Innovation Grant Co-ordinator at Coolbinia Primary School. Supporting the implementation of Little Green Steps in WA was an integral part of Coolbinia Primary School's Innovation Grant, which aimed to facilitate the development of community partnerships that encourage sustainable practices in educational settings.

All Little Green Steps participants indicated appreciation for the training program as there are no other professional learning opportunities in WA in this field, specifically targeting the early childhood sector. The first training workshop was held on Friday 14 May 2010 at East Victoria Park Primary School. Nineteen people attended, with nine from schools and ten from childcare systems. Educators from Albany and Dunsborough also participated.



Helen and participants. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.

Twenty attendees came to the Saturday 15 May workshop at the Mount Lawley Child Care Centre. Ten participants were from schools, including a parent from the grounds committee, six from childcare systems, one AAEE-WA member and three early childhood students.

The educators were given a range of activities throughout the day and these included discussions and hands-on experiences. Through the use of statements and photographs they refined their understanding of sustainability, as this term has multiple meanings for most people. They explored ethical dilemmas related to using toxic chemicals in gardening and cleaning. Everyone learnt from the hands-on experience of creating a small no-dig garden, cleaning without toxic chemicals and building a worm farm from scratch.

The participants interacted with two water catchment models and discussed the impact waste and pollution had on plant and animals in a catchment system. Many of the educators were unaware they were able to book a session with Amy Krupa from the Phosphorus Action Group to come to their school or centre to show the children the model and talk about where the water they use and tip in their drains goes. Ms Krupa can also help schools/centres build frog bogs and improve the biodiversity of playgrounds. Use of a simple catchment model, in a tub, was also displayed.

The Roaming Recycling Trailer was on display during both training days. The educators explored the wide range of hands-on activities available from the trailer; activities to support children understand what goes into waste and how to limit waste. All classes at East Victoria Park Primary School utilised this free service during the first training day. Other schools and centres



Establishing a worm farm. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.



Helen demonstrating a simple water catchment model. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.

within the North Metropolitan Regional Council can similarly access this service.

Educators were encouraged to discuss their experiences in sustainability education as different topics arose. For example, there was lively discussion about how to encourage parents to provide waste free lunches. A great story from one centre related how to reward children who bought a waste free lunch to school. The children's names went into a box and at lunch time one lucky child was selected to play with "Lenny the Lizard" for the rest of the day. Lenny became a powerful tool for encouraging children to ask parents to stop incorporating packaged foods in their lunchboxes. Another teacher noted on the course evaluation survey:

"I thoroughly enjoyed the workshop and having my knowledge shared and appreciated." Participant

The training days concluded with an opportunity for participants to share ideas, experiences, and concerns about implementing zero waste initiatives. Ms Nippard described initiatives from centres in the eastern states which showed that with good planning and resourceful staff and parents anything is possible in education for sustainability. A typical participant survey response was:

"Great day, thank you. Will be off to implement ideas we have already had in conjunction with these new ones."



Roaming Recycler landfill activity. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.



Setting up a no-dig garden. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.



Non chemical cleaning. Photo courtesy Jennifer Pearson.

The educators who attended the Little Green Steps program indicated they needed an Early Childhood network set up for them so they could continue to exchange ideas. Many participants offered to host the next training day at their centre. As one participant stated, the network will provide:

"Another opportunity to re-meet and share experiences from changes we have attempted and/or made."

AAEE-WA has facilitated the creation of this network of support. The network is now in operation for early years educators who are keen to educate children and parents about sustainability. Other interested educators who would like to join this network may contact Elaine Lewis by email on: <elaine.lewis@det.wa.edu.au> for further information.

AAEE-WA would like to acknowledge the generous support provided by Mr Neil Spence, Principal of East Victoria Park Primary School, for the use of school facilities to implement the Little Green Steps training program. Similarly acknowledged is the generous support given by Ms Jody Cable and Ms Debbie Van Leen, Directors of the Mount Lawley Child Care Centre on behalf of their committee for the use of their facilities.

Contact Dr Jennifer Pearson on <j.pearson@ecu.edu.au> if you wish to register for upcoming workshops.

This project is supported by the Western Australian Landfill Levy fund.