

Strengthening Connection to Environment: The Greenbank Way

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In this paper, the author provides an account of an initiative that positioned the strengthening of a connection to the environment as a catalyst for teaching improvement. Using an understanding that pedagogy impacts the environment, leaders in Greenbank School formulated a plan to refocus their classroom curriculum approaches.

Greenbank State School is situated on the western edge of Logan, surrounded by lush bushland in what is now a commuter corridor between Springfield and the Flagstone Priority Development Area. A drive past the site belies the fact that almost 1100 students attend this 127-year-old school that works very consciously and purposefully in the environmental space.

The school's vision of 'Creating a World of Difference' is based on six core values. One of those values is 'connecting and applying learning to the world for a sustainable future'. The Indigenous notion of 'Kanyini' (connectedness) is practiced throughout the school from Prep to Year 6. To foster in our students a deeper sense of identity and connection to the land and our impact on it, we very deliberately focus on our local environment and the broader links to the natural world in which we live.

The notions of self, others and place are embedded in the DNA of the school; through our teaching and constant modelling we work towards achieving the connection between these concepts. Every classroom has a 'Greenbank Connected Kid' poster and throughout the year ideas, concepts and practices are added to the 'kid' so that each class can identify what it is they are doing and how they as a class wish to be within the space of the school. From there we expand to more broadly identifying as a school including how and why we engage in the environmental space.

From our perspective, while programs such as recycling waste are important and helpful, unless the students are connected to the purpose behind them, then it's just another act of compliance. We want our students to understand why we practice what we do and to take a lead role in making a difference because they want our world to be a better place. Within a

school setting, students have an enormous environmental impact and they begin to recognise where and how they can lessen that. Using the pathways throughout the school is a simple example. When the students understand that not using paths leads to the loss of top soil and ultimately erosion, they understand why they are asked to walk on the pathways. The choice to walk on pathways becomes a conscious act to look after the environment and not one of compliance with a school standard.

The major excursion each year level takes annually is to Pullenvale Environmental Education Centre (PEEC). Our staff complete pre-visit courses, in addition to regular professional development with the PEEC team throughout the year. This is to ensure we understand the importance of the work that we do and to allow us to engage at far more than just the surface level. We also invite PEEC staff to Greenbank State School to share in the work of our students and where it is taking us.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's concept of 'perezhivanie' – usually translated as 'a lived experience' wherein emotion connects a learner deeply to their surrounds – is at the heart of how we engage with the PEEC program and what we build here at the school. Students, teachers, leaders and parents work together to create an emotional context in which life-affirming values and deep learning can flourish. They connect to real places in a spirit of fun and positive action and in a safe way for the ongoing benefit of the whole educational community. During the course of their excursions we ask the students to be conscious of what they experience emotively whilst in a bushland space.

This connection is built upon during classwork and used to leverage further discussion and engagement with the impact we have on our local area. In 2019, Year 4 students began to influence change throughout the school by leading the student body through the evidence of the amount of waste we create in a day, week, month and year. Through investigating the problem and identifying possible solutions, the Year 4s have impacted on the whole school. Every Wednesday is now a waste-free day where all students are encouraged to bring their food in containers that can be reused. Their vision is to expand this across the week but they have started small. Inspired by the enthusiasm of the Year 4s, a staff environmental committee has formed to further promote the ideals around low impact and sustainability across the school. The tuckshop is also working to reduce wastage of plastics and single-use items. Staff have been provided with refillable cups and products with less wrapping have been sourced by the P&C.

The idea that our pedagogy impacts the environment was put forward to the team. 'Sheet Free Fridays' – a day a week without using any photocopies – were proposed and met with a range of responses. It became quite evident that challenge to change adult behaviour is much harder than the challenge to change student behaviour. Nonetheless all of these conversations and actions have to take place if we seriously want to walk the talk around becoming more environmentally conscious.



In order to make changes, all aspects of our practices have to be considered; we assist the students to understand that simply because something is a good idea, it doesn't happen automatically.

This year's Year 4s will build on the work from last year and will progress towards presenting a business case to the principal and the business manager to replace the plastic bags at the ice station with an alternative that is hygienic and recyclable. The potential increase in cost can be offset by the funds raised from recycling our plastic bottles and empty drink cartons, in conjunction with our local Scout group.

As our students mature they can extrapolate about the broader impact people have on the environment in Australia and around the world. Whilst environmentalism seems to be one of the more trendy movements to be involved in (along with plant-based diets and video-sharing app TikTok), the Doomsday Clock which is set by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has moved to 100 seconds to midnight. That is based on a combination of the level of atomic threat and climate change – in other words the likelihood of a man-made global catastrophe.

The symbolic clock was set in 1947 and has never been closer to midnight. Our students take environmentally responsible behaviour and sustainability very seriously. As a school community, we continue to implement and expand strategies that further deepen our students' connection to our school values to create a world of difference. We can't just talk about reducing waste and the use of plastics, we have to seriously discuss it and model it. By walking the talk, we may help produce a generation of environmentally conscious adults who can wind the Doomsday Clock back.