

Approaches to Environmental Education for Sustainability at Port Vincent Primary SA

Port Vincent's Environmental learning journey has taken place on many fronts. A decade ago Environmental Education at this school was valued as a "package deal", we "did" Salt Watch, Worm Watch, took part in occasional tree plantings and were involved in "Landcare in the Classroom"-activities. Our programs were perceived to be dynamic, awareness raising and successful. We thought we were "doing it well".

After a particularly engaging series of lessons however, a young child frustratedly demanded of a teacher "Well, what can one kid do?" This made us realise our lessons actually focused on the "Trees, Crabs and Stuffed Fish" approach and this was not what students needed or wanted. As a result we re-examined our approach to Environmental Education and set out to empower our students and to give them an environmental headset for life, to foster the futures thinking, "have an understanding of, and concern for, stewardship of the natural environment, and the knowledge and skills students need to contribute to ecologically sustainable development".¹

It quickly became obvious that our students needed to be engaged in their own learning and to feel they were in control. We examined various approaches and then adapted the NSW MISA approach (Motivating, Investigating, Sorting and Action). We acknowledged our students were motivated, adept at researching but lacked the ability to sort through a range of options and then take appropriate action. An Eco-club was formed and one afternoon a week was set aside for environmental pursuits. (Curriculum work focused on Science, Society & Environment and The Arts Learning Areas). Each year the club has had a different name and focus. This is determined by students at a whole school meeting at the start of each year. It has become a powerful forum for student voice, curriculum ownership and constructivism in action. An Environment Committee, elected by students, runs the club, co-ordinates activities and actions in consultation with staff.

We enlisted the help of local community groups especially our Tidy Towns group and local landowners. From this an intergenerational approach to environmental action has successfully been implemented. Together we have built walking trails, safe access paths to the reef, revegetated areas, monitored dry land salinity, reviewed projects and shared our knowledge. School and Community pride are to the fore.

Through this approach our students have come to realise the importance to the community of both paid and unpaid work and to realise "one kid" can do a lot, but a lot of people can do it better. Effective environmental education has become not a program you do, nor a policy you merely follow, but rather something that integrates and involves community capacity building.

In recent years we have formed a strong alliance with the Port Vincent Aquatic Centre. The partnership between students and School and Aquatics staff has been formalised as "The Marine Team". All R-7 students are involved in programs at various bands. Students over 10 years of age, for example, monitor our local reef through the Reefwatch program, and forward results to the Conservation Council of SA. In this way, over the past 4 years, we have built an understanding of the biodiversity of life in this special habitat and will be able to monitor any changes to it. Such investigations were published on the students CD "Jewels of Gulf St Vincent". Recently students have begun a comparative study of the new marina seabed. Results are reported to the District Council of Yorke Peninsula who anticipates using data gathered to determine if current controls are working. Such monitoring could assist in the development of minor management plans and the implementation of future works and controls.

¹ Goal 1.7 of the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century.

The success of the Marine Team, and our programs, has been widely acknowledged through award recognition and by our students being invited to act as guest speakers at local, national and international conferences. In this way our students feel they can make a difference locally, set examples nationally and even have a voice globally.

Successful programs need committed support from the whole school community. Our Governing Council fully supports our approach and associated projects. Environmental Education is a priority on our School Development Plan and has been so for 5 years.

Coordinated approaches to environmental education are essential. At the same time programs cannot operate in isolation. In addition to local community support we have enlisted help and technical advice from experts and formed strong partnerships with local Landcare officers, those involved in Natural Resource Management, Dept Environment and Heritage, PIRSA (Primary Industries and Resources SA), SA Museum, Coastcare, Marine and Coastal Community, the Malacological Society of SA and MESA (Marine Educators Society of Australasia). Approaches have been refined through participation in DWLBC (Dept of Water Land and Biodiversity Conservation) "Landcare in the Classroom" and "Cluster Schools" projects.

In the past 12 months we have formed an alliance with the neighbouring schools of Edithburgh and Stansbury. As a cluster we have realised we have a lot to share and there are many exciting ways we can learn from each other. Vincent brings to the cluster a wealth of knowledge about biodiversity and our unique marine environment, Stansbury has a great tradition of working with the environment in terms of solar energy and water use while Edithburgh students are keen to share the excitement of wind farms and ways to develop alternative sources of energy. Student forums are the focus of our sharing activities and we are working to empower our students to live sustainable lives.

We accept that the size of Port Vincent (current enrolment 25) is our greatest strength. It gives us the opportunity to initiate projects, then develop and monitor them over time. This is an opportunity not many other schools share.

Our ideas, planning and methodology are based on SA Curriculum Frameworks. Units of work developed have been showcased on DECS (Dept. of Education and Children's Services) website and published by PIRSA and the DWLBC.

As educators we have come to realise change cannot be imposed. It needs to be driven not by an individual but by a group. It needs to be part of the ethos of the agency. A strength of Port Vincent is that environmental education is a part of our way of life. Should one of our students be asked to identify a concern for the future it is possible that environmental issues would not feature. This is not because they are not important but because our students are fortunate to live in a community where environmental concerns, deep learning and actions are part of the lifestyle.

Our school motto is "Learning for Life" but this does not mean we are setting out to educate citizens of the future. We believe our students need to feel in control NOW, they need to have a say NOW, to know how to access expertise NOW, and that the actions they take NOW are effective. In this way we hope to give them a "Headset" of Environmental care and concern both today and tomorrow.

Our vision for Port Vincent is to always be an exciting centre of learning for students and the community, and a leading example of environmental stewardship and sustainability.

Many of these issues and practices could be considered when formulating a national EE policy.

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