

Albert Park Preschool's Sustainability Journey

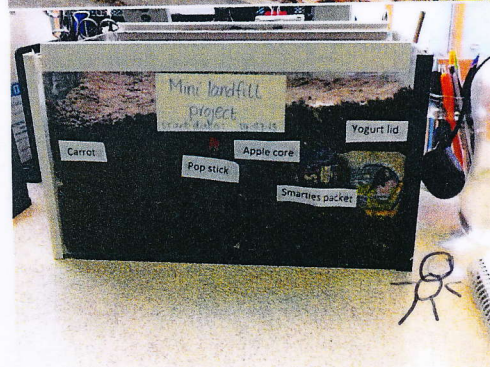
My finger hovered over the laminator switch. On the one hand I was creating resource for our worm farm to help the children put the right food into the farm. On the other hand, I was about to use a plastic sheet that would hang around on the earth for much longer than I will.

I had just internalised one of the big debates in early childhood education - the great laminate debate. To laminate or not to laminate - that is the question. To create long-lasting resources or to avoid all use of plastic entirely. My mother called me recently, laughing - because she had stumbled onto an early childhood teachers' Facebook group with fifty plus comments from the supporters and detractors of laminating in early childhood services. That is early childhood educators in a nutshell - passionate, dedicated, very sure we are right in our stance.

At the start of 2015 I began a new job at Albert Park Preschool. As part of my new role I have been made the sustainability officer at this kindergarten and allocated five hours a week to work towards sustainability in the kindergarten program and practice. Part of my role was to work with all four kindergarten groups and the educators.

My colleagues had not only been discussing lamination, but the use of suitable materials within the kindergarten program. Together, we came up with a goal we were happy to work towards together - to resist the glossy lure of the catalogues that are sent to us regularly and only use recycled and reclaimed materials for art and craft purposes. We made a trip to Reverse Art and stocked up on interesting materials for pasting, playing and projects. We slowly transitioned our plastic containers to wooden items we sourced from local op shops - the current tally being under \$100 dollars for replacements of most of the items across the kindergarten.

The biggest challenge was paint. I sourced some botanical paints (expensive but they gave a delicious scent of the fruit and vegetables they were made from). We trialled blueberry, lemon, and persimmon. The children revelled in the sensory delights of sniffing the paints as they used them. They were much lighter than traditional paints, more along the lines of powder paint/watercolours.



We wanted a concrete experience to help connect the children to nature. We decided to do some planting to re-use milk containers. The local café was happy to give us their used two litre milk bottles. We cut the tops off, added drainage and each child at the kindergarten had the chance to plant a pea. The children loved watching the peas spiral up and out of their pods, racing the growth against their friend's growth (ah ha, a meaningful measurement concept!) When they were ready to be staked and planted, we sent the peas home. In our annual survey this experience was counted by the families as one of the best our kinder provided.

As part of my Sustainability Officer role I began to work with Brett from the Port Phillip City Council. When we received our new building lease we were given (initially daunting) targets to meet - reduce power, water and waste by 50% in three years. I filled Brett in on the things we had been doing (or not doing) at the kindergarten. His advice was straight forward - stop focusing on the small stuff. Taking time focus on the small stuff like laminating was less important than researching and implementing ways to make our building more energy efficient.

Together with our sustainability subcommittee (made up of family volunteers and interested staff members) and Brett from the council, we came up with a new and loftier goal - to become an energy neutral kindergarten. The first step was to log our energy usage at the kindergarten and then to reduce our usage. Our eventual aim is to install solar panels to meet our remaining energy needs.

To start this process Brett introduced me to a very handy tool called a "power mate", an electrical reader that can tell you how much energy an appliance is

drawing, even if it is just switched off. Our microwave drew a surprisingly high wattage. An educator who was present when we read the microwave became inspired to start switching off her own microwave at home. We read the power usage of each of the appliances at the kindergarten. Through this process we identified simple ways to reduce our energy consumption. We removed two light bulbs in our foyer lights and were able to reduce our power consumption by 5% (we later learned that the foyer had previously been used as a children's dentist - this was the reason for the four fluoro lights in a small area; completely unnecessary in the space). As a result of working with Brett, my own energy bill at home reduced a staggering \$20 a month, mostly due to small changes like turning appliances off at the power point after use, but also because of a new energy efficient fridge and washing machine.

The parent committee actively fundraised for a community garden throughout 2015. We were able to install a fully reticulated, no dig, edible garden. We can now offer passers-by and the families who visit kinder and the maternal child health nurse a fresh selection of herbs and vegetables.

We have not yet achieved our goal of becoming energy neutral, we are continuing to work towards it and our other goals. Who knows when we will achieve them? All we know is that we are on our way.

Camille Lee Hill
Albert Park Preschool

