NIC HALL explains how every teacher can start to teach sustainability and environmental education using the NSW K-12 syllabuses...

As a teacher working in an Environmental Education Centre, I have the pleasure and opportunity to take groups of students to amazing places and have incredible experiences linking sustainability and environmental education. Importantly, the content of my lessons and the curriculum I am teaching is no different to any other teacher, as it draws upon the suite of NSW syllabuses.

This article aims to support teachers to link environmental and sustainability education into the planning, programming and teaching cycles. What follows is based on a variety of documents, websites and resources that you can use to improve your understanding, learn from others and share the successes you have with your class each day.

This article builds upon my presentation for the Centre for Professional Learning’s 2016 Environmental Education Conference, Empowering Students to Create a Better Future and the ideas, messages and resources are relevant to all teachers across Years K-12.

In true inquiry process fashion, I see our journey through this topic as a series of questions:

- Why sustainability and environmental education?
- Where do I start?
- Where do I go now?
- What else is out there?

**Why sustainability and environmental education?**

Sustainability and environmental education is authentic, relevant learning that engages and motivates students to investigate aspects of their world. More importantly, it should not be an additional task for teachers. Rather, it is about using real-world learning opportunities to deliver your teaching content. Sustainability and environmental education enables students to develop knowledge and skills whilst empowering them to make a difference. It can make learning fun!
Where do I start?

When planning and programming with sustainability and environmental education in mind, it is always appropriate to look at any important and helpful documentation that is available to you. My first point of call is the Australian Association for Environmental Education’s Make the Change (AAEE, 2015). This resource provides a starting point for WHY teaching about sustainability and environmental education is an important aspect to build into your teaching program. AAEE note that sustainability is a cross-curriculum priority and encourages teachers with ideas for creating significant learning opportunities and resources.

The framework created by AAEE also places teaching sustainability in schools at the heart of change, ultimately leading to both changes to government and industry alike.

The other key starting point is the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) filter. The ability to filter content makes searching for sustainability in the curriculum easy and allows KLA focused results to be located, as well as potential links to other learning areas and content that may not have been considered. Sustainability education has been identified as an important part of educating active and informed citizens by NESA, the Australian Government and the Ministerial Council of Educators (The Melbourne Declaration).

Where do I go now?

Armed with your new-found understanding and motivation to integrate sustainability into your programs it is time to look at the Sustainability Curriculum Framework (see attachment at the end of this article). This resource focuses on what students should know and be able to do by the end of each of the identified stages of schooling, providing an extra developmentally appropriate level to your programming and lesson planning.

The Sustainability Curriculum Framework was also key in the introduction of the Sustainability Action Process (SAP) which explains that “learning to take action that will result in people living more sustainably is the central learning goal of the framework” (DEWHA, 2010). Thus with this framework in your ‘go-to’ list of resources you will not only have milestones to refer to, but a process that you can teach students to use when exploring and building knowledge around sustainability topics.

One example of how a school used the SAP relates to the GoMAD (Go Make A Difference) project completed by the student lead group at Young High School. After recognising a local issue with the diminishing Box Gum Grassy Woodlands, they made a case for change and then explored ways to increase awareness. The students learnt about their topic and communicated it to a broader audience.
through educational presentations and the generation of pull-up banners. Their banners are displayed at public locations such as the council chambers and at local community events.

Now that the SAP is on your radar, it is important to look at two other processes that are relevant places to inject sustainability and environmental aspects. These are the geographical and historical inquiry processes. Much like the SAP there is a focus on posing of questions, gathering and analysing of data and information to reach an outcome that is an action. This provides an authentic context for understanding and communicating systems in the natural and man-made environment.

**What else is out there?**

To gain a couple more feathers for your sustainability and environmental cap, you can explore the NSW Department of Education’s website, particularly focusing on ‘curriculum resources’. You will find units of work and lesson plans that are tried, proven, and ready to go. The section dedicated to ‘reference and research’ is an ideal way to further your understanding and better position sustainability and environmental education in the whole school setting.

There is also the Office of Environment and Heritage website which is the home of Sustainable Schools and a plethora of teacher, student and community resources that will lead important learning and programming ideas. Along with K-12 opportunities for funding grants, environment groups, and case studies examples that will motivate and inspire new projects and learning opportunities.

Teachers can sometimes feel like we are isolated in our classrooms and social media is a fantastic way to reconnect, keep up to date with best practice and network in the interest of creating collaborative experiences for our students, our communities and for ourselves. You may also be able to share, learn and discuss environmental topics on Twitter feeds such as ‘EnviroEd’ and connect with passionate educators on a regular basis. Yammer is similar, with specialised interest groups such as ‘Environmental Education’.

**Find out about your local Environmental Education Centre**

In NSW, the Department of Education has twenty-five Environmental and Zoo Education Centres (EZEC) located around the state. They provide various programs for visiting school groups to showcase the unique features of their location. Programs offered are linked to NSW syllabus documents and stage groups. The Centres can also work with schools to support school-based environment programs and teacher professional development.
Environmental and sustainability education is a powerful teaching tool that can be part of each teacher’s toolbox. It encourages authentic place-based learning that challenges students to explore and investigate the world they live in. Most importantly, it empowers students to make a difference and create a better future.

References:


Attachment:


Nic Hall is an environmental educator working at Red Hill Environmental Education Centre, Gulgong. He is an experienced primary school teacher who has always been passionate about outdoor and environmental education. Nic spends the majority of his time teaching students outside the classroom walls, helping students to better understand and appreciate the natural and man-made environment through increased knowledge and awareness.