



Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective that will inform the community-wide framework to improve literacy in Tasmania covering from the early years, throughout schooling to adults.

As a United Nations University Recognised Centre of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development, Education for Sustainability Tasmania (EfSTas - [efs.tas.edu.au](http://efs.tas.edu.au)) is a globally connected, Tasmanian network of organisations and individuals with a remit and passion for education for sustainability. As a network, we understand that humanity's 21st century challenge is to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet and we endorse the United Nations recognition of education as *fundamental* to addressing this challenge (United Nations, n.d.). At EfSTas, we are passionate about education that enables future generations to live well; literacy in all of its forms, is fundamental to ensuring this.

Sustainability is increasingly relevant to education - across all age groups. This submission considers education in a holistic sense, as the development of people in reaching their fullest potential with the capacity to lead satisfying lives.

The United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability in 1987 as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability is not only relevant to the health and wellbeing of populations, but is relevant to education, and indeed, literacy.

Sustainability applies quite directly to the definition of literacy employed in the consultation. We draw on the definition provided by the Literacy Advisory Panel and advocate that literacy learning is most effective when it is taught in real world contexts and with materials that are meaningful to students - regardless of their age.

"Literacy involves listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and creating texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts. Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills needed to access, understand, analyse, and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others. It involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." (Literacy Advisory Committee, Paper 1, p. 4)

Here in Tasmania, we are well aware of the global challenges of unsustainability being experienced with greater frequency around the world, as well as in Australia. These challenges are exemplified in

the unprecedented floods in Queensland and New South Wales in February and March 2022, which followed on from an (ongoing) global pandemic, which in turn was preceded by the unprecedented Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020. Issues of sustainability, particularly those associated with climate change, are a regular part of life in contemporary Australia and present new imperatives for literacy learning and development. It is not extreme to suggest that literacy learning that responds to the sustainability challenges of this time is instrumental to the education, wellbeing and flourishing of all Tasmanians.

In what follows, we respond to the three questions, 'what do you think is needed to improve literacy in Tasmania?'; 'what is working well?'; and 'do you know of a program to improve literacy in Tasmania?'

### **Q1. What do you think is needed to improve literacy in Tasmania?**

We champion that literacy in Tasmania can be improved by teaching literacy *through* real-world contexts. EfSTas advances that sustainability gives a meaningful context to children and adults' literacy development with benefits that extend beyond literacy learning (Green, 2012; Kidman, 2019). According to the Climate of the Nation 2021 Report, 75% of Australia's population are concerned about climate change and 82% of people believe that it will result in more bushfires, more droughts and flooding, and animal and plant species extinction (Quicke, 2021). In an international study, 81% of Australia's young people reported that they believed people had failed to look after the planet (Hickman et al., 2021). Questions of sustainability provide relevant and timely context for the development of literacy competency for Tasmanians.

When literacy is taught in ways that are connected to people's everyday experiences and areas of interest, engagement is more likely to occur (Alexander, 2018). When engagement in teaching and learning activities is strong, learning outcomes are more likely to be achieved (Alexander, 2018). Localised and community connected education strongly supports learner engagement with proven improvements in literacy development (Bascopé et al., 2019). However, in order to successfully implement such approaches across formal and informal education settings, resources are required to support educators and to break down entrenched boundaries between schools and communities that prevent authentic, real-world learning from occurring. We advocate that:

- More support for all educators and teachers is needed in the form of professional learning and time off class to develop their understanding of what sustainability is and how to teach literacy *through* sustainability learning.
- Expertise exists in the community that should be harnessed in education contexts, to break down barriers between education as 'an institution' and community as 'the real world'. To do this, more support is needed in schools to establish connections with community members and organisations. This may come in the form of Community Engagement Officers whose role is to work directly with teachers and community to foster and bridge opportunities for collaboration.

In the following sections, we focus in particular on early years, schooling years and higher education and take this opportunity to include some of the programs that we believe are working well to engage learners that improve literacy through sustainability contexts.

### **Q2. What's working well?**

Curriculum frameworks in Australia provide the context in which literacy and sustainability learning can be brought together in formal education settings. In the early years, we locate the focus on sustainability and literacy in relation to the outcomes of the curriculum for the early years, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), in

particular Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world and Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators. These two outcomes provide a focal point where sustainability learning and literacy can be productively pursued together.

In school curriculum, sustainability is a cross curriculum priority (ACARA, n.d.), and literacy is identified as relevant to sustainability. For example, there is connection to the English learning area: “The content in the language, literature and literacy strands is key to developing and sharing knowledge about social, economic and ecological systems and world views that promote social justice” (ACARA, n.d., sub-section “English”), which is central to sustainability learning. We see that the curriculum frameworks are a policy context that can bring literacy and sustainability together.

Recent studies in the field of Education for Sustainability and Environmental Education, have identified pedagogies that offer promising advantages for supporting literacy learning. Amongst these pedagogies are outdoor (or nature-based) learning and experiential pedagogies. Kuo et al. (2019) conducted an integrative review of literature relating to children’s experiences of nature-based learning and concluded that nature-based experiences can support children’s learning while also promoting children’s wellbeing and their environmental stewardship. In Stagnitti et al. (2015) research, learning outcomes from participation in play-based programs are higher for children than direct instruction approaches.

Experiential pedagogies, such as play based learning for young children and arts rich experiential approaches offer promise for literacy learning. Powell and Somerville (2020) led an Australian Research Council project investigating the integration of literacy and sustainability in early years learning, taking arts rich experiential approaches to developing literacy through music. In this work, the enhancement of diverse literacy learning was demonstrated through the creative and nature-based pedagogies applied.

Evidence establishes children’s need for connections with nature for healthy development and wellbeing (Chawla, 2015; Dopko et al., 2019; Dowdell et al., 2011). Yet, children are spending less time outdoors, correlating with media attention around increasing reports of ‘nature deficit disorder’ among children (Louv, 2005). In response, the number of outdoor learning programs around Australia is rising because of educators’ and parents’ understanding of the significant benefits of outdoor learning for children’s healthy development (Clausen, 2020).

There are opportunities to further investigate and demonstrate the direct benefits of learning outdoors or nature-based learning and the development of literacy. We argue there are connections worth exploring between sustainability learning, literacy and wellbeing, for example, as encompassed in the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework (Tasmanian Government, year) *DOMAIN 3 – being healthy – “Children are mentally healthy”*.

The connections between literacy and sustainability are possible in a range of early learning, primary, secondary, tertiary and informal learning environments. As demonstrated by the Charles Darwin University, teaching of literacy can occur in a robust and holistic manner through a sustainability lens which is implemented through their unit for first year tertiary education students *Academic Literacies Through Exploring Sustainability* which “...develop[s] the skills and confidence to think critically, research, read, write and present ideas in a range of modes. This is achieved through the articulation of an academically credible understanding of a central theme, sustainability, which significantly impacts our lives in the 21st century. As part of the development of your academic literacies, you'll build on your awareness of the skills and requirements for success at university.” Further information can be found at: <https://www.cdu.edu.au/indigenous-futures-education-arts/education/cuc100-academic-literacies-through-exploring-sustainability>.

### **Q3. Do you know of a program to improve literacy in Tasmania?**

We recognise that literacy learning is most effective when the strengths of learners and of the environments in which learning occurs, are valued and authentically embedded in programs. Therefore, we share four programs and briefly describe how they advance literacy in Tasmania. The programs include:

- The Department of Education Bush Kinder Program
- Sustainability Skills Cafes
- The Youth Climate Leaders Conference
- Sustainability Action Planning Program

#### **Bush Kinder - Aboriginal perspectives**

Bush Kinder is operated by the Department of Education at the Sustainability Learning Centre Hobart, with strong input from Aboriginal Education. The program is scheduled weekly, is child-focused and supports curiosity and exploration in the outdoors. In research undertaken by Beasy (2021), commissioned by the Sustainability Learning Centre, Department of Education Tasmania, an evaluation of a Bush Kinder Program demonstrated how nature and play-based learning supports the development of multiple literacies. The evaluation mapped the program against the Early Years Learning Framework which evidenced strong alignment across all of the EYLF outcomes.

Evidence of children engaged in multiple literacies included developing a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation. Data collected related to children's engagement in the Bush Kinder Acknowledgement of Country song which illustrated their developing capacity to engage with Country and an appreciation of Indigenous practices of connecting with land. Engaging with Indigenous literacies are important for sustainability, and support the expansion of children's engagement with dominant (Western) interpretations of literacy. Through providing young children with opportunities to immerse themselves in nature and develop understandings of Country, contextually relevant literacy learning is achieved alongside wellbeing benefits.

#### **Sustainability skills cafes - Social justice perspectives**

Sustainability skills cafes have been implemented in Tasmania's northern regions over the past three years, led by Northern Early Years Group with support from EfS Tas. The skills cafes initiatives have been implemented in partnership with DoE (ie. Waverley Community Skills Cafes, with Waverley Primary School), with the Launceston City Council (ie. Sustainability Skills Cafes) and with Northern Children's Network (ie. Skills 4 Kids Cafes).

In each of these implementations, sustainability skills cafes have recognised diverse literacies that value social justice perspectives, local knowledge and have foregrounded community contributions to literacy development.

One example of a program that supported literacy development within families was the Recipe Box initiative which was implemented as part of the Waverley Community Skills Cafes (WCSC) project (see Emery et al., forthcoming) as explained below:

##### **Recipe boxes**

Recipe boxes with pantry basics and fruit and vegetables were provided to school families with children in the early years as an initiative of the WCSC project based on the idea that the cooking activities would help to provide a rich and varied language-learning environment (Hansen & Broekhuizen, 2020) at home for young children who were unable to attend school [because of COVID-19]. Packs included recipes that families could cook together as a way for young children to learn about healthy foods and develop literacy skills with other family

members. Families also interacted with the WCSC project's Facebook page by posting photographs of their children's engagement in cooking activities.

Another program, Skills 4 Kids Cafes, provided opportunities for connecting literacy learning with arts and crafts and sustainability learning:

The S4K Cafes were guided by ideas of sustainable living in the design of activities emphasising social, environmental and cultural dimensions (Beasy, 2020). The social and environmental fabric of the intergenerational Cafes fostered a sense of people (including children) as collaborative 'artisans' learning about ways of valuing and working with materials and re-purposing them. Further, there was an emphasis on increasing young children's social, language and independence skills and disrupting taken-for-granted child-adult relations (where adults are expert). From the outset, cultural sustainability emphasised children's life skill development within a shared 'café' culture...

Some community members brought along activities that were personally meaningful; for example, one introduced a button box so children could sort and match the various buttons. In addition to developing skills of identifying patterns, classifying and counting, this activity enabled the community member to share her personal history, talking about buttons from her uniform from when she was employed in the armed forces.

Overall, the children were embraced as decision makers and active agents in the program (McGrath & Nolan, 2016), able to make choices about how they participated in various activities.

(Excerpted from Beasy et al., 2021)

These 'skills cafes' projects have focused on links between literacy, sustainability, children's agency and children's wellbeing; in this way they have connected literacy curriculum areas with other government priorities such as the Child and Youth Wellbeing Plan.

### **The Youth Climate Leaders Conference - High school student perspectives**

The Youth Climate Leaders Conference aims to equip youth from across Tasmania with the skills to become climate leaders in their schools and communities by creating a project that will make a difference for themselves, their community and the planet. The program includes a conference at the beginning of the year to 'set the scene' and connect students with community mentors with specialist sustainability skills. Capacity building is built into the program through community mentors, who guide students in the development of their projects and in project delivery. At the end of the year, students come back together to present on their project delivery experiences. Through this inquiry-based, action learning and student driven program, young people develop multiple literacies that support them "to participate fully in their community and wider society". For more information about the program, the following videos are available: [Tasmanian Youth Climate Leaders Conference 2021 \(Youtube\)](#); [Tasmanian Youth Climate Leaders Conference 2020 \(Youtube\)](#); and [youth leaders taking climate action \(Youtube\)](#).

### **Sustainability Action Planning Program - Primary student perspectives**

The Sustainability Action Planning Program is a joint initiative of EfSTas and the Sustainability Learning Centre which supports upper primary students in their engagement with sustainability projects in school. The program is also delivered by the Department of Education Online Extension Program for gifted and highly able students. Connected explicitly to the Australian Curriculum - English language [ACELA1516] and literacy [ACELY1816] - the program supports students to engage with the views of others and formulate ideas and actions in response. The program uses an inquiry model and utilises World Cafes in program delivery.

World Cafés are interactive, inclusive group processes that encourage conversation-like discussion of things that matter. In the program, students develop their own compelling questions and work together to form collective responses. Activities of the program include:

- facilitate a class discussion to generate questions about what students want to ask each other about
- write compelling questions that will be used in a World Café
- analyse conversations and notes collectively from the World Café
- present findings back to a group
- create an action plan based on the information gathered

A short video introduction of the program can be found [here](#).

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