Education for sustainability and education outside the classroom

Education for sustainability (EfS) is learning to think and act in ways that will safeguard the future well-being of people and our planet. It’s about maintaining an expectation of, and facilitating learning that empowers students to participate in taking informed action[[1]](#footnote-1). Research into teaching and learning in education for sustainability[[2]](#footnote-2) has shown that an action orientation brings to life the key competencies of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (p.12), as it requires students to combine *knowledge and understanding,* *attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action*. In EfS terms, this is about developing student action competence. Action competence is the heart of EfS, and interweaves knowledge, learning how to learn and applying learning in authentic contexts[[3]](#footnote-3).

Education outside the classroom (EOTC) contributes to the goal of action competence in EfS. Six aspects of action competence have been identified: experience, reflection, knowledge, vision for a sustainable future, taking action for a sustainable future, and connectedness. EOTC *experiences* are critical in enabling students to explore, examine, and investigate the environment, and through planned and guided *reflection* develop important understandings and *knowledge*. Having a range of *experiences* in the environment is known to engage students, build skills, grow commitment and *connectedness* to support *action taking for a sustainable future*.

Being in the environment also provides opportunities for students to experience a diversity of views, learn to evaluate differing values and opinions with consideration of sustainability from four key angles or aspects: the environmental, cultural, social, and economic[[4]](#footnote-4). These aspects take the view that people are part of the environment and therefore environmental and sustainability issues are deeply rooted in society. One of the greatest challenges we face today is people’s disconnection from the environment and how this manifests in environmental issues within society. For example, do students know where their water comes from, or where it ends up once they’ve used it? How well do they understand the processes that enable them to eat a ham sandwich for lunch? More simply for young students, it may be knowing that milk comes from a cow as opposed to the supermarket.

EOTC is vital in enabling a re-connection between people and the environment and the world they live in. The notion of connectedness is especially relevant with respect to Māori perspectives of the environment where all life is interconnected through ancestry and whakapapa, as children of Ranganui and Papatūānuku[[5]](#footnote-5). Including and developing these perspectives as part of EOTC in EfS needs to be an important facet of learning experiences.

Therefore, from an EfS perspective EOTC should include an exploration of our relationship to outdoor learning places and consideration of how those places contribute to overall learning outcomes. For some this may be an acknowledgement to the place, deciding on an appropriate ‘care code’ for the exercise, and considering these in the after activity reflection. At this end of the continuum, learning is focused on sustainable practices – while we are here, how can we ensure minimum impact? For others, seeking to understand the place or environment from multiple perspectives, develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to take action for a sustainable future will be the foremost purpose for being there. At this end of the continuum, learning is focused on questioning, investigating, and knowing – why are things this way? Is there a sustainable alternative? Can we participate in that alternative or make it happen?

Wherever your programme or learning experiences sit on such a continuum, there’s a challenge with *The EOTC Guidelines: Bringing the Curriculum Alive* to support students to re-orient their thinking about the environment and sustainability – to take on a longer term view, to show curiosity and concern for the earth, and to develop the ability to make change where it’s needed. This in turn will see us all as being responsible for the choices that will shape the kind of earth handed on to future generations.

1. For more information on ‘taking action’, see http://efs.tki.org.nz/EfS-in-the-curriculum/Taking-action [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more information, see http://tlri.org.nz/investigating-the-the-relationship-between-whole-school-approaches-to- education-for-sustainability-and-student-learning [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more information, see http://efs.tki.org.nz/EfS-in-the-curriculum/Taking-action/Action-competence [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more information, see http://seniorsecondary.tki.org.nz/Social-sciences/Education-for-sustainability/key... [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more information, see www.teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)