

## THESIS SYNOPSIS

# Pre-Service Early Childhood Teachers' Preparedness to Teach Education for Sustainability

**Anita Croft**

*University of Waikato*

**Supervisor**

Dr Chris Eames, University of Waikato

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### Thesis Synopsis

The benefits of beginning Education for Sustainability (EfS) in early childhood are now widely documented. With the support of their teachers, young children have shown that through engagement in sustainability practices they are capable of becoming active citizens in their communities (Duhn, Bachmann, & Harris, 2010; Kelly & White, 2012; Ritchie, 2010; Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008). Engagement with EfS has not been widespread across the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand (Duhn et al., 2010; Vaealiki & Mackey, 2008) until recently. One way of addressing EfS in early childhood education is through teacher education institutions preparing students to teach EfS when they graduate.

This master's thesis reports on early childhood teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to engage in EfS at the beginning of their teaching career. Using interpretivism as the theoretical framework, a mixed-methods approach was employed to collect qualitative and quantitative data in two phases. In phase 1, a cohort of student teachers, at the completion of an EfS unit in their final year of teacher education, were surveyed by questionnaire, using mainly open-ended questions. In phase 2, follow-up semi-structured interviews were undertaken with four graduates 4 months after they began teaching in early childhood settings.

Participating in an EfS unit appeared to have influenced the student teachers' conceptions of sustainability, particularly in relation to environmental sustainability. They felt it was important for early childhood teachers to support children to develop connections to nature and to actively engage them in sustainability practices. In order to do this, the majority identified that teachers needed to have prior knowledge about sustainability issues and how to teach them. Having implemented an environmental

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*Address for correspondence:* Anita Croft, Owner, Growing Kiwi Gardeners, Christchurch, New Zealand. Email: [growingkiwigardeners@gmail.com](mailto:growingkiwigardeners@gmail.com)

project with children while on practicum, students felt the most effective pedagogical approach involved a combination of social constructivist strategies.

All students reported feeling a level of confidence and motivation to teach EfS at the completion of the unit. However, despite these feelings, the level to which the four graduates had actually engaged in EfS was influenced by the realities of being a new teacher and the value placed on EfS by the centre where they were employed. All hoped to engage more meaningfully with EfS once they had settled into their roles.

This study demonstrated that if meaningful change toward sustainability in early childhood is to occur, then both inclusion of EfS in initial teacher education and support for EfS within early childhood centres is crucial.

## References

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### Author Biography

**Anita** is an educator with seven years experience teaching in early childhood where she developed an interest in providing infants and toddlers with authentic experiences in the natural world and helped to build environmental awareness throughout the whole centre. From 2010 to early 2018, Anita has worked in tertiary education where she has been able to expand her professional interest in early childhood education for sustainability to teaching pre-service early childhood teachers. Currently, Anita is the owner of Growing Kiwi Gardeners, an organisation that provides gardening programmes in early childhood education.