

Young Children and the Environment: Early Education for Sustainability. Edited by J. M. Davis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 305 pp. ISBN:978-0-521-73612-1

This edited book is welcome because of its focus on early years education and sustainability. Despite the topical nature of environmental issues there are very few books that explore these in relation to education in the early years (birth – 8 years) and this book will be useful for teachers, parents and any one who works with young children and who wants to take a “green” and sustainable approach. This research-based book will also definitely find a place in universities and colleges. A range of perspectives are introduced and Dr. Julie Davis, the Editor, has invited a variety of contributions. Taken chapter by chapter the book covers a lot of ground. While mainly Australian in context, the opening foreword by Professor Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, who is UNESCO Chair of Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development, means that it comes with an influential international recommendation.

When so many deficit or depressing views tend to predominate, it is encouraging that this book focuses on “positive ideas and actions” (p. 1). The authors suggest many ways to encourage young children to address environmental issues in their learning. Nearly every page has an idea, a call to action, or a question to provoke thought; there are many references to research and critical perspectives. Each chapter contains a section headed “provocation”. These might address wider questions, such as “is it reasonable to discuss issues such as global warming with young children?” (p. 131), or might promote the formation of a case study (p. 226) based on a project for sustainability.

In the use of the word “provocation” there is an indication that the Editor favours a perspective from the preschools of Reggio Emilia. This is an approach from Italy that recognises the child as a citizen of today and the future, a citizen with rights who is entitled to exercise choice and discrimination as they take their place in their community. This image of the child is upheld in the projects described here as there is a strong emphasis on participation.

Projects are described that include: links to ICT; environmental leadership; relationships with nature; community gardens; and “practical reconciliation” (p. 200). I was impressed by the range of approaches to the issue of sustainability. Within the chapters there is useful information and up to date reference list at the end of each one for the interested reader who may wish to explore further.

A strong point is that the ideas presented here are practical and framed in order to support social transformation (p. 9). Workable suggestions are based on the experiences of the authors. For example: Megan Gibson’s work with leadership and change is described in detail; Melinda Miller is specific about how to weave reconciliation into an educational programme; Lesley Robinson and Sue Vaealiki give stories from the field in useful sections marked “what it might look like” where they describe “harvesting rain”; Margaret Lloyd mentions projects where ICT has been used to support sustainable practices and disseminate information and she gives examples of its use with young children.

Contributors are from Australia and New Zealand and it is noteworthy that indigenous perspectives are included. In both places indigenous peoples have upheld notions of sustainability despite encroachments on their land and having to bear witness to the destruction of environments and sacred spaces (see also, www.ourgeneration.org.au). Despite this, the perspectives here are again positive and the tone affirms hope for “a glad tomorrow” (p. 77).

This book is inspiring and forward looking. It emphasises pedagogy and research. It will be a support for teachers and researchers who are prepared to be innovative and who wish to focus on sustainability. It affirms those already working in the field and gives value to young children as participants in their world. Julie Davis is to be congratulated for a book that presents these projects in a way that is attractive, clear and accessible to a range of readers.

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Reviewer Biography

Dr Jane Bone is at Monash University where she is involved in early childhood education with research interests that include ethical approaches to research with young children and issues of spirituality and wellbeing.