

REVIEW

A Review of “*Young Children & the Environment 3rd Edition-Early Education for Sustainability*”

Review Reference

Davis, J.M., & Elliott, S. (Eds.). (2024). *Young Children & the Environment 3rd Edition-Early Education for Sustainability*. Cambridge University Press.

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Children’s hands and hearts offer many found treasures to anyone fortunate enough to be engaged in the field of early childhood education and care. Their young minds are abuzz with all the possibilities of their environment and children rightly expect their concerns for a sustainable future to be taken seriously. This book does just that.

This third edition of *Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability* invites educators to ponder and participate in developing appropriate pedagogy and practice for sustainability in the early years. The title places young children at the centre of this discourse, with the cover image of children’s hands reinforcing this positioning. On the one hand, our attention is drawn to the symmetry and beauty of natural items, and on the other hand, to the random flotsam and jetsam of discordant marine debris. This poignant image, illustrating one of many significant worldwide sustainability challenges being faced by children, now and into the future, deftly captures the national and global emphasis and applicability of this book.

There is so much to celebrate about this third edition. The editors, Davis and Elliott, have substantially updated the content and expanded the contributors, drawing together work from researchers and experienced practitioners from around the globe, all of them leaders in conversations around education’s response to global crises. Thus, they have created a valuable resource of foremost importance for our times. *Young Children and the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability* is hopeful yet realistic about the challenges, as emphasised in Professor Daniella Tilbury’s Foreword:

Profound shifts are needed in the way we see and engage with the world if we are to carve pathways for a sustainable future. Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability (p vii).

There are no small goals here. As we acknowledge that current generations are living beyond the Earth’s capacity to support future generations, this book is essential reading for policymakers, researchers, tertiary institutions, professional educators, Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) services, practitioners, students, and communities.

Having outlined the urgent need for Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) in our increasingly imperilled world, the editors elucidate on the evolution and development of the field of sustainability in early childhood education. It is a much more urgent issue globally compared with international thinking since the first edition in 2010. Following this illuminating introduction there are many-faceted analyses, chapter by chapter, of the distinctive aspects of ECEfS. Though prolific research backs each chapter, this is much more than a dry, scientific text. Rich anecdotes from the field and detailed case studies demonstrating direct experiences and enormous respect for the voices of children abound.

The multidimensionality of sustainability is explored, in detail in the early chapters, moving beyond the child-centred, anthropocentric approach which was dominant at the start of this century to a relational, commonworlds view. Theories upon which ECEfS is based are discussed with clarity and the definitions in the margins are most helpful. A greater urgency is given to moving beyond teacher-centred, isolated activities or superficial treatment of important, complex issues towards embedding ECEfS in all levels of education. Immersive Nature Play Programs provide possibilities for learners to move from frustration, fear, and eco-anxiety to deep, agentic involvement in contributing to the common good. The common good is acknowledged as including human and non-human entities. Rather than merely being *in* nature, now the child is *with* nature, inextricably “entangled” within the natural world with nature as a co-constructor of learning.

Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability expands the field of ECEfS to promote systemic changes in societal, economic, and political dimensions as well as environmental. This changing landscape is reflected in the new iteration of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF version 2.0, 2022) where sustainability has finally been acknowledged and included as one of the EYLF’s eight key principles with aligned practices and learning with Outcome 2 in particular: *Children are connected with and contribute to their world* (EYLF V2.0, 2022 p38). The discussion in chapter 8 (pp. 166–184) is Exploring the Sustainable Development Goals: *Beyond the environmental* dimension clarifies transformative pedagogies capable of building social sustainability. The authors weave together a network of research and documents including the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015) with its transformative promise to engage all people — including children — to counteract discrimination and inequality. The focus of this book is given further significant international weight by the publication of the 2023 UN General Comment: Number 26 on the Rights of the Child and the Environment which has a special emphasis on climate change and reminds us.

Environmental harm is a significant threat to children’s rights globally . . . A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is both a human right itself, and necessary for children to enjoy their rights. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/crc/gcomments/gc26/2023/GC26-Child-Friendly-Version_English.pdf (p.1).

Non-Indigenous people are needing to collaborate with Indigenous people to realise traditional, sustainable ways of being and together, co-construct new, sustainable ways of living, as we attempt to limit future damage and correct the harm done since colonisation. Educators will find inspiration in *chapter 6* (pp. 120–141), *Practical possibilities and pedagogical approaches in early childhood education for sustainability: Australian perspectives*. It presents five stories from the field to explore the inclusion of indigenous content in the early years.

One of these stories begins with

“Our place-based learning reflects local Aboriginal culture and heritage as children embrace the sacred aspects of the landscapes they become to know intimately. . . . This beyond-the-gate curriculum encourages a sense of belonging to place, to the living [and non-living] things within it and to one another in citizenship and solidarity.” *Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability* (p.139).

Children's complex eco-centric thoughts and concerns are captured and advocacy for the places they belong to are facilitated.

The image of the child as competent, agentic, and visible in communities is at the heart of embedding ECEfS. Children have a mandated right to have their opinions heard and acted upon and given the opportunity to remedy problems they have identified. A discussion of digital technology for children to use purposefully to communicate their viewpoints is found in chapter 9 (pp. 189–207). Stories throughout the book exemplify children's capacity for real-world critical thinking, problem-solving, and activism. Immersion in a rich, responsive, respectful ECEfS programme where there is a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning enables the development of curious dispositions which engage children's heads, hearts, and hands, in service of sustainable actions. Awareness that we are not alone but companioned by millions and millions of related life forms seems to be intuitive for young children. Wilson's theory of Biophilia (1984) is apparent in the children of these field studies in their sense of interconnectedness with and responsibility for the natural world. Children can teach us to listen and see . . . the wind, the sky, the sea, the trees, the land and all the creatures we share our worlds with. We adults need to learn this deep listening.

Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability concludes with chapter 16 (pp. 339–352): entitled *Using systems thinking to mainstream early childhood education for sustainability* which distils themes and perspectives from previous chapters and emphasises the scale of changes required for a truly transformative Early Childhood Education, focusing on the three essentials: communities of practice, teacher education, and curriculum policy review. It ends with a reminder of the urgency for a systemic embedding of ECEfS and a rallying cry for:

... - marginal *no more!*" *Young Children & the Environment-Early Education for Sustainability* (p 351).

One of the book's strengths is its structure. As already mentioned, do not miss the case studies and the field stories which can be dipped into and out of for more inspiration. We have been impressed by the profound respect for children's rights and for many enthralling insights into children's wisdom and their capacity to effect change. There are tables and diagrams which enhance understanding of the chapters, boxes with useful provocations for discussion, and margin notes that simplify the more complex concepts. Being researchers ourselves, we value the comprehensive reference lists at the end of each chapter.

We found this book to be an unfolding, connective, exploratory process, and a path to understanding many essential concepts and practices, honouring our intrinsic relationship with the web of life in which we are held. What we see in this book are people working together to restore the Earth and bring justice to its human and non-human inhabitants. We thank the contributors for their work with children and for being, in the words of American environmentalist, activist, and author, Paul Hawken at the Commencement Address for the University of Portland in 2009:

... *willing to confront despair, power and incalculable odds to restore grace, justice and beauty to the world.*

Commencement Address University of Portland, May 3rd, 2009 Retrieved 23 April, 2024, from <https://designthinking.ideo.com/blog/an-inspirational-message-from-paul-hawken>

Acknowledgements. We are both living, working, and exploring on the lands of lutruwita (Tasmania) and pay our respects to the palawa/pakana people and especially the mouhennenener people of nipaluna (Hobart) who did not survive colonisation. lutruwita will always be palawa/pakana land and may we continue to walk together towards truth and reconciliation.

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Authors’ biographies

Jennifer Dudgeon has 43 years’ experience as an early year’s teacher and education for sustainability leader across Tasmania and in 2020 was honoured, with a national excellence in teaching award for environmental education. Jenny has been both the convenor and committee member of the Australian Association for Environmental Education — Tas and Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania, she initiated the Tasmanian Nature Play Network and proudly volunteers and advocates to support the important work of these not-for-profit ECEFS organisations and Tasmanian environmental causes.

Chris Haas is an educator of 47 years’ experience. She has worked as a teacher in a wide range of different settings with age groups from adult, through secondary and primary until she discovered Kindergarten, 25 years ago. She has specialised in learning with, in and for nature over all her teaching roles. Chris completed a Master of Education with a research project titled *Kindergarten Children’s Introduction to Sustainability through Transformative, Experiential Nature Play*. Chris has been on the executive with Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania for many years and is the current state secretary of the Australian Association for Environmental Education — Tas chapter. As a reflection of this enduring passion for a stronger nature-sustainability nexus, Chris is currently moving into a more committed role as an ecological activist

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