

Book Reviews

YOUNG CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENT EARLY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Julie M. Davis (Editor)

Cambridge University Press, 2010 (Paperback, \$59.95)

This edited text brings together Australian and New Zealand authors who are clearly passionate about addressing environmental issues and have linked this to their expertise in early childhood education. The emerging generation of children stand to benefit greatly from the ideas expressed and the directions proposed in this book which is practical in nature and targeted at early childhood educators. Anyone working with young children should be taking notice. There are still a number of professional disciplines that are neglecting to incorporate environmental sustainability and climate-related knowledge into professional practice models and many that neglect these areas in coursework. This book can stand tall in relation to the training of early childhood educators and needs to be a prescribed text for all such training courses.

With the Forward written by UNESCO's Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, this text of nine chapters is divided into two parts. Part One takes as its focus examination of the theory, knowledge base and purpose for educating our children about their environment and sustainability, and includes practical and grounded proposals for teaching environmental sustainability in early childhood. Part Two incorporates chapters addressing aspects of reconciliation, technology, community well being, and the role of research and systems in ensuring change is achieved and maintained.

In structuring the chapters, the ideas of each are brought together in a Conclusions section followed by a list of references, the majority of which are contemporary and reflect current thinking about the environment, climate and sustainability, and education in the early years of development. A particularly useful tool used throughout the book is the 'Provocations'—questions relevant to the issues being discussed that move the reader to reflect on her/his experiences, values, beliefs and ethics, as well as posing problem solving scenarios. It was not my intention in developing this review to provide an overview of each of the nine chapters, but there are features of each chapter of this book that I found worthy of attention. As a result I have ended up commenting on some aspect of each chapter and so decided to provide review comments in the order in which the chapters have been published.

Julie Davis, in the first chapter, begins at the beginning in terms of setting the environmental 'scene'. There are no erroneous assumptions made about the reader's existing knowledge of environmental issues, but this is not a laboured exposition of complex global and ecological issues. Rather it is skilfully succinct and convincing, providing a theoretical framework which underpins subsequent chapters. In Chapter Two, Sue Elliot explores 'nature' as a human construct and human-nature relationships, but cleverly grounds her ideas in field or practice-based stories as illustrations. This chapter links relationships with environment and nature to children's play and sense of place, wellbeing and development.

Less satisfactory is Chapter Three, though this is in no way a reflection on the author, Megan Gibson, who had the unenviable task of trying to encapsulate key ideas about leadership for establishing a culture of sustainability in early education organisations. She acknowledges factors such as context, staff engagement and team building and organisational change. Each of these is almost a study on its own and addressing them coherently and with sufficient depth is an impossible task given the vast literature currently extant in academic circles alone. However, she manages to distil some of the key issues pertinent to an early childhood educator considering the introduction of an environmental sustainability approach to teaching in an early childhood setting.

Chapter Four, written by Robert Pratt, takes forward the ideas of establishing an education program providing a model for curriculum development based on a clearly articulated philosophy and key principles of practice. Included is a discussion of specific teaching possibilities related to waste management, water conservation, energy conservation and green cleaning, each developed to engage children and assist in the formation of their ideas about the key environmental concerns. This is followed by a chapter on ethics and pedagogy by Lesley Robinson and Sue Vaealiki which I thought might have been better placed earlier in the text. However, there were important issues raised in this chapter about ethical practice that will demand changed responses from early childhood educators in relation to what is meant by caring, listening, participation and hopefulness as they embark on the process of early childhood teaching for environmental sustainability.

Chapter Six commences Part Two of the text, providing some provocative commentary and drawing the link between Reconciliation and sustainability. Melinda Miller urges that Reconciliation needs to be a central concern together with social, political and economic dimensions of sustainability. She raises the question of how early childhood educators are, themselves, educated, suggesting that a deep understanding of contemporary Indigenous issues is imperative if the children they teach are to receive education for environmental sustainability. This is followed by Margaret Lloyd's discussion of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) with the focus being on the need to seamlessly incorporate the many benefits of ICT into early childhood education programs. Her argument is that children need to learn competencies that will assist in problem solving and the attainment of environmental goals, including sustainability, in a complex world. This necessarily encompasses skills in social relationships and the many modes of communication now available, together with the confidence to tackle ethical problems.

In Chapter Eight, Sue Cooke draws together ideas about health and wellbeing with children's connections to their natural world, urging closer partnerships between health professionals and early childhood educators. She suggests stronger partnerships as a vehicle for ensuring better understandings of how engagement in natural surroundings enhances development, recovery and resilience; all of which have been found in research to date. She also discusses the need to address the changing ecology of childhood. The idea of enhancing interdisciplinary partnerships and more integrated professional responses is not new to many who work in the human service industry. However, with the

continued trend to specialisation and division of disciplinary endeavours into silos, the points made are valid.

Finally, Chapter Nine argues for the development of a robust research community to address environmental and sustainability activities, programs and outcomes in the early childhood sector, together with the need for systemic change within early childhood education. Jo-Anne Ferreira and Julie Davis call for attention to complexity and diversity which allows small scale innovation and change to inform large scale reform. They propose this process is better suited to achieving reform than past, top-down, large scale reform agendas, but needs to be supported through the development of a research base and increased interdisciplinary engagement.

This text is very accessible and should be attractive to those who seek to explore complex ideas about environment and sustainability, as well as those looking for practice-based knowledge and ideas. It is necessarily a little limited in depth, given the span of issues addressed, but is a valuable contribution to the field of early childhood development and education. It is also a useful addition to the literature for those studying in such disciplines as social work, psychology, nursing and childcare because of the clarity with which it positions arguments for incorporating both thinking and action for sustainability.

REVIEWED BY

Dr Jennifer Lehmann

School of Social Work and Social Policy
La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus

BEREAVED MOTHER'S HEART

Carla van Laar

St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, 2008

This unusual publication was published in 2008, but came to my attention for review earlier this year. *Bereaved Mother's Heart* is, superficially, the simple story of Carla and Andrew's son, Vaughn, who was diagnosed with Complex 4 Deficiency and died a few months before his fourth birthday. It is unusual in that it combines Carla's journey through grief and loss with her expression of this through her art. It is a powerful demonstration of the nature of a mother's life when faced with her son's disability, the care he required and his inevitable death. The art work, though not to everyone's taste, reflects the retrospective joys and sorrow, and the poignant emotions carried throughout Carla's journey of motherhood; and her loss of her firstborn child.

There are layers of meaning throughout this book. One connects the reader to the spiritual aspects of the experience that contribute to life's meaning; while others lead to reflections on both the experience of infinite grieving and to finite grief and loss. A further layer relates to recovery, leading to the resumption of a meaningful life.

The book is likely to be of interest to mothers, in particular, who may benefit from the strong sense of sharing a difficult experience that this publication offers; especially more introverted women who find it more difficult to express their feelings, but want to reflect on their own and others' experiences of losing a child. However, timing is important in dealing with grief and loss and I think some of the images and reflections on the loss of Vaughn may be quite