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Edited by Julie M. Davis
Excerpt
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Introduction

Introduction

As in the first edition, the following chapters provide a wealth of ideas, inspiration and provocations for those who have both the short-term and the long-term interests of young children at heart. This book covers a spread of birth to age 8 learning settings and highlights the potential for community learning arising from early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) initiatives that demonstrate that young children and their teachers and parents can be provocateurs for sustainability in their wider community.

While the main focus of the first edition was Australian and New Zealand experiences in ECEfS, in this edition authors come from further afield, with new chapters from Japan, Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom. As the challenges of sustainability resonate globally, these wider perspectives make significant, additional contributions to ECEfS. As chapter authors were asked to include more examples of working within the domains of social and economic sustainability in this edition, I am hopeful that readers will appreciate that sustainability is more than a focus on the natural environment. Nevertheless, as we stated earlier, we make no apologies for treating nature with the respect it deserves.

In this edition, the book is divided into two parts. **Part 1** follows the basic structure of the first edition. It includes **Chapter 1** where I update concepts related to sustainability and education for sustainability (EfS) and discuss the recent expansion of ECEfS across the globe. I then develop ideas about sustainability challenges and how these relate to young children. The case is reiterated that early childhood education has a real contribution to make towards changing unsustainable patterns of living. **Sue Elliott** focuses **Chapter 2** on the underpinning relationship between children and their experiences in the natural world, and re-emphasises that children’s experiences in nature are fundamental to their health, wellbeing, learning and development. Sue reiterates that early childhood educators have a key role in incorporating natural elements into children’s play and learning environments and in sharing their enthusiasm and wonder about the natural world with children.

In **Chapter 3**, **Megan Gibson** updates her earlier chapter, examining transformational educational and organisational leadership as a key contributor to creating cultures of sustainability within early childhood education settings, re-emphasising ‘whole settings’ approaches, the creation of ‘learning communities’ for sustainable living, and recognition of young children as active and informed citizens and change agents. In **Chapter 4**, **Robert Pratt** again details his approach to implementing ECEfS, this time based on his current early childhood education context of Kenmore West Kindergarten. Robert weaves threads from his chapter in the first edition into this new chapter, as well as building in newer elements, such as connections to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (that is, Indigenous) culture, and tackles the vexed issue of ‘risk’. In **Chapter 5**, **Sue Vaealiki** and **Lesley Robinson**, from New Zealand, update their discussion of teaching and learning in ECEfS, linking these to ethics as a pedagogical principle that provides tools for learning to live with, and make decisions about, environmental,

Introduction

educational, social and cultural issues and topics. The revised chapter strengthens the view of children as rich and competent citizens of the present who already have capacities and capabilities to influence the future. **Chapter 6**, written by **Melinda G. Miller**, locates ECEfS initiatives within scholarship and practice that examines Indigenous perspectives and the aim of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. She emphasises that examining EfS in this way helps to ‘flip the lens’ and garner fresh perspectives on our own lives and viewpoints.

Meanwhile, **Margaret Lloyd** in **Chapter 7** re-explores the ‘virtual world’, examining the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) for EfS for young children. She comments that technology has a critical role to play in sustainability and that it is time to embrace ICT as part of creative solutions to sustainability rather than rejecting it as part of the problem. **Sue Cooke**, in **Chapter 8**, re-examines the synergies between ECEfS programs and projects, and international movements such as Health Promoting Schools, Child Friendly Cities and Transition Towns. The point is made that living sustainably is not only good for the planet but also for personal and community health and wellbeing.

Added to Part 1 are three new chapters. In **Chapter 9**, **Nadine McCrea** writes about food issues – a vital aspect of local, regional and global sustainability – using the concepts of young children’s food learning and daily practices with food as springboards for discussion and practice. Nadine emphasises a clear distinction between nutrition and children learning holistically about food. The next new chapter, **Chapter 10**, is by **Lyndal O’Gorman**. Lyndal focuses on the arts and sustainability and discusses ways that these two areas can be successfully brought together in early education. She uses a 5-year-old’s drawing project to exemplify her key points. The final chapter in **Part 1**, **Chapter 11**, is written by **Sharon Stuhmcke**. Sharon draws on her doctoral studies and illustrates effective use of the Project Approach to implement ECEfS. Sharon revises the concept, calling for a Transformative Project Approach that supports children as active agents of change for sustainability as a necessary step in addressing sustainability in early education.

Part 2 comprises a mix of new and updated chapters that provide an international perspective to ECEfS. **Chapter 12**, by **Eva Ärlemalm-Hagsér** and **Ingrid Engdahl**, examines ECEfS in Sweden. The authors provide an exemplar of ECEfS undertaken in a Swedish preschool focused on young children and their ideas and concerns about ‘battery chicken’ egg production. **Chapter 13**, by **Michiko Inoue**, discusses environmental education in Japan. She asks whether current conceptualisations, based in nature studies and resource conservation, are adequate for addressing the contemporary sustainability challenges in Japan. **Chapter 14** is by an author from South Korea, **Okjong Ji**, who outlines government and education initiatives in that country in relation to ECEfS. Okjong reports on an example where young children and their teachers use the Project Approach, in combination with new technologies, to learn about and engage

Introduction

the wider community in sustainability activism. **Chapter 15** is by three authors from the United Kingdom, **Louise Gilbert, Janet Rose** and **Paulette Luff**. These authors use the four strands of the Education for Sustainable Development initiative (2012) introduced by the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to shape their discussion about recent loss of momentum in the United Kingdom in the implementation of ECEfS initiatives. They comment that new opportunities, nevertheless, can emerge to keep EfS on the early childhood education reform agenda.

In the final chapter, **Chapter 16**, **Jo-Anne Ferreira** and **Julie M. Davis** update their ideas about systems approaches to creating educational change for sustainability. They re-emphasise the importance of research and whole-of-systems approaches in creating and strengthening the deep and wide cultural shifts necessary for EfS to become embedded in early childhood education.

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Part 1

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Chapter 1

What is early
childhood
education for
sustainability
and why does it
matter?

Julie M. Davis

Young Children and the Environment

This book’s purpose

As I wrote in the first edition of this text, this is not a book about the perils of global warming and its impact on children, although climate change provides an impetus for this text. Nor is it a response to issues that seeks to shift responsibilities from adults to children, asking next generations to fix what we leave behind. Instead, it is a book of positive ideas and actions that shows what early childhood education communities can do when children, teachers and parents work together to address perhaps the most serious issue of our times – how to live sustainably.

Since the first edition was published in 2010, scientific evidence of human causation of climate change has become virtually incontrovertible (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2013), despite the continuing ‘unbelief’ of a small number of vocal individuals, lobby groups and politicians. The authors of the *Summary for Policymakers* published in relation to the Fifth IPCC Assessment Report state: ‘Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gasses have increased’ (IPCC 2013, p. 4). Nevertheless, and regardless of one’s views about climate change, the matter of (un)sustainability has never really been in question – it is quite apparent that humans are living beyond the capacity of existing social, environmental and economic systems to function well or, clearly, equitably (United Nations 2013). The global financial crisis that took effect in 2008, for instance, exemplifies unsustainable economic systems that impact negatively upon societies, just as the 100 or so species of Australian flora and fauna that have become extinct since European settlement – with more than 1500 under threat – are evidence of unsustainable environmental systems. Increasing numbers of refugees leaving their homelands in leaky boats or risking travel across deserts and dangerous borders are evidence of unsustainable social/political/cultural systems.

Nevertheless, while many measures of global unsustainability paint a grim picture, it is gratifying to report that the early childhood field with regards to sustainability is in a significantly different place to where it was five years ago when the first edition of this text was published. Early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) has become an international movement, although it is fair to say that there are many parts of the world yet to engage and deep challenges remain. Perhaps the most significant challenge is the gross disparities in access to basic early childhood education that many young children and their families and communities experience. It is difficult to practise education for sustainability (EfS) if access to early education is missing in the first place, or you are an elementary teacher in charge of a class of 60 children, as I experienced recently in Papua New Guinea (PNG). In PNG, less than three hours by plane from wealthy Australia, the infant mortality rate is 40.84 deaths/1000 live births, 10 times that of Australia where the

Chapter 1 What is early childhood education for sustainability?

rate is 4.40 deaths/1000 live births (Index Mundi 2013). Not surviving to your first birthday constitutes the ultimate in unsustainability. But this text is not asking young children and early childhood educators to address such complex issues; that is primarily the role of nation states and the international community. However, it is about putting these issues in context and identifying the power of ECEfS as a catalyst for change, and the power of the very young as agents of change for sustainability. It is about learning, hope and taking action to ‘make a difference’ within the scope of children’s own lives.

Why this book is important

Life on Earth is experiencing a critical period. While climate change has captured the headlines, the bigger issue is that humans are not living within the Earth’s capacity to provide clean air, clean and adequate water supplies, fertile soils, productive oceans and ongoing resources for the world’s human population, now more than 7 billion, and for the millions of non-human species. As the health of global ecosystems and the health of human populations are inextricably linked, the need for fundamental changes in how humans live is increasingly difficult to ignore. The crisis in the world’s financial markets, first made evident in 2008, demonstrates what happens when we live on borrowed capital. ‘The global financial crisis has drawn attention to the problem of borrowing from resources that do not exist’ (University of Gothenburg & Chalmers University of Technology 2008). The impacts of this crisis were, and continue to be, worldwide; the most economically and socially vulnerable have become more vulnerable. Governments face new, deep and urgent challenges to maintaining economic stability and social cohesion. Coming on top of mounting ecological crises, deep cracks are showing in the way humans ‘do business’ on this planet.

The next generations – our children and grandchildren – are the recipients of the best and the worst that is passed on to them. There seem to be endless and exciting opportunities ahead for many children, particularly those born in the West. Nevertheless, even for rich nations (the over-developed world?), there is increasing concern about the state of the natural environment and the economic and social prospects for current and future generations if actions are not taken to reverse or, at least, ameliorate what is happening. As Lester Brown, formerly of the Worldwatch Institute, said, ‘Nature has no reset button’ (Brown 2000, para. 25).

What is sustainability and why does it matter?

Sustainability remains a confused and contentious topic with no universally accepted terminology or definition. A popularised description from the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (1987) Brundtland Report – also known as *Our*

Young Children and the Environment

Common Future – describes sustainable development as that which ‘meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (p. 8). This is a definition that continues to resonate with me, and hence I continue to use it here. Perhaps, though, a more poetic way of capturing this complex concept is ‘enough for all forever’, a description used by a young person at an international conference in Australia that later shaped the *Statement on Sustainability for All Queensland Schools* (Education Queensland 2008).

In Australia and New Zealand, the term ‘sustainable development’ has largely been replaced by terms including ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable living’. (In this text, I use ‘sustainability’ – and therefore ‘education for sustainability’ and ‘early childhood education for sustainability’ – as the descriptor to capture this concept.) This is preferred because of the implied assumption that development equates with economic growth, and that only after economic growth is achieved can environmental concerns be addressed. As many in the environment movement emphasise, supporting the growth and development of economies – especially through increasing mass consumption – in a world of finite resources and growing population is not a sustainable option.

As understood by all the chapter authors of this book, sustainability is a broad concept that is about so much more than addressing concerns related to the natural environment – important though these are. Therefore, in this second edition, authors were asked to highlight, more strongly, the dimension of social sustainability, although it is clear that environmental sustainability remains central to their thinking. We continue to hold to the idea that healthy people require a healthy planet, a concept recently advocated for in the 2014 statement ‘From Public to Planetary Health: A Manifesto’ published in *The Lancet*. Its authors call for the transformation of public health via ‘a social movement to support collective public health action at all levels of society – personal, community, national, regional, global and planetary’ (Horeton et al. 2014, p. 847). These are new and potentially powerful allies for efforts for which many of us have been agitating for decades.

Figure 1.1 illustrates this broad view.

In summary, sustainability emphasises the linkages and interdependencies of the social, political, environmental and economic dimensions of human capabilities. It is a view that acknowledges relationships between humans, and between humans and other species. It is also a view that is underpinned by critique of the ways humans use and share resources, and recognises intergenerational equity issues.

Sustainability is essentially an issue of social justice and fairness. The causes and effects of unsustainable living are disproportionate and unevenly distributed. Some humans enjoy the benefits of global economic development, industrialisation and new technologies; many people and many other species bear the risks and costs. Among human populations it is the poorest nations, and the poorest within nations, who are most at risk (Lowe 2006). As Nicholas Stern, author of the British government’s report