

REVIEWS AND RESOURCES

Reviews

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Research in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability: International Perspectives and Provocations

Julie Davis and Sue Elliott (Eds), Routledge, 2014, 337 pages, \$51.95 (paperback [Amazon]). ISBN-13: 978-0415854498

Reviewed by Jamie L. Hirsh

‘Start early’ is a motto we have come to hear often when advocating for children’s health and development across myriad disciplines. The editors and authors of *Research in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability* claim that such a motto is also imperative in the education of, and for, sustainability. In a world plagued by myriad environmental, economic and social problems, and the obstinate and outdated perspectives regarding such problems (failure to acknowledge the anthropogenic causes of climate change and other sustainability issues, failure of individuals to understand that small, seemingly innocuous actions may have profound consequences, etc.), a major cultural shift is clearly needed.

The book asserts that one of the best potential ways of addressing problems of sustainability is by educating young children to be critical thinkers, change-makers and models of sustainable behaviour; fostering an educational environment in which children are immersed in sustainability issues from a young age becomes an imperative step towards solving potential future local, national and global problems. This process involves both a basic educational component, as well as active collaboration with teachers, other members of the child’s family and the greater community to highlight issues that are both personally relevant (e.g., having fresh, healthy food to eat) or have broader social significance (e.g., reducing community poverty and promoting alternative transportation options). The editors identify the research framework as early childhood education *for* sustainability (ECEfS), which differs slightly from the more traditionally prominent education *in* sustainability (children’s relationships with nature) and *about* sustainability (exploring environmental topics) (see Davis [2009] for these distinctions and their implications for research and practice).

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This book, thus, delves into a research area that has not received much attention within the broader fields of either early childhood education or education for sustainability, and attempts to bridge the gap between current initiatives and future research and practice. The book consists of an introduction by the editors and 19 chapters written by both newer authors and experts in ECEfS, early childhood education and/or sustainability from various countries to promote a transnational conversation. The chapters correspond to three designated content clusters: (i) ethics and values; (ii) historical and sociocultural contexts; and (iii) curriculum and pedagogy. Both within and across these clusters, the authors discuss a wide range of topics, including but not limited to: case studies and guidelines for implementing education for sustainability in early childhood settings, as well as current and, likely, future challenges in doing so; the logistical underpinnings of organizing and implementing ECEfS—considerations regarding content, context and pedagogy to engender the outcomes researchers and practitioners want to produce; the historical trajectories of early childhood education and education for sustainability across countries and cultures; the importance of culture and diverse cultural perspectives as a foundation and catalyst for early childhood education; children’s rights to education and as active members of society and the corresponding policy and governmental involvement necessary to enact those rights; and fostering deep care for the planet and all of its inhabitants and understanding the mechanisms underlying such patterns of behaviour.

There are many strengths in this text. The content and perspectives come from around the globe and offer a glimpse into the historical origins and current practices relevant to early childhood education and education for sustainability. This is further complemented by a seamless inclusion of varying research orientations, including both practitioner-focused and theory-based models. The book, thus, has utility for students, practitioners, educators or anyone interested in a variety of approaches to ECEfS as well as the state of current research. The efficacy of this book is further aided by the fact that specific sections and chapters can be read in isolation depending on the readers’ interests.

Reflections on future ECEfS research are less well addressed, such as programme development, implementation and assessment. While early childhood education will almost certainly always have some positive impact on children’s development (especially in the short term), the extent of that positive impact and the degree to which that impact maintains over time cannot be known without additional research. The field would benefit greatly from research that assesses the development of empirically supported learning outcomes and curricula, as well as longitudinal research on the effects of such programming. Of particular interest would be the research that systematically measures changes in the behaviour of the children immersed in these educational programmes (both during the programme and at intervals in the future) as well as changes in behaviour for those children’s family members, significant others, and other members of the community.

Though it transcends the scope of the book to some extent, the availability of follow-through programming during the later educational years is another critical consideration for the future development of ECEfS. During the formative years, ECEfS increases a child’s knowledge, allows her many opportunities to engage in pro-social

and pro-sustainable behaviour and increases her interest in the natural and social world around her. However, this early start is only likely to have a profound impact if education for sustainability is more wholeheartedly embraced in elementary education, secondary education and higher education, in which the development of problem-solving skills is enhanced with growing cognitive abilities to more critically think, reason, strategize and so on. If this is not occurring through formalized education, children must be immersed in an environment where caregivers continue to foster and promote sustainable behaviour. Therefore, it may not only be beneficial to target policy that promotes education for sustainability at all levels of education, but also to develop interventions that specifically enhance the sustainable behaviour of children *in conjunction with* their caregivers (something that may or may not be targeted in programmes supporting education for sustainability). Without continued education for sustainability or the existence of other supportive environments, the benefits of ECEFS may, essentially, become unsustainable.

Despite the need to more fully address the above considerations, the book provides an excellent introduction to the emerging field of ECEFS, the historical context from which the field developed, and considerations for future development in research and practice. The publication of this culturally, theoretically and conceptually diverse transnational conversation provides the groundwork for continued dialogues on enhancing children's early childhood education and shaping our youth as change agents for sustainable development.

References

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