

Special Issue: Early childhood education responses to sustainability challenges in the Asia Pacific region

Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

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As the year 2020 draws to a close, humanity has been called to reflect on our vulnerability as a species, given our susceptibility to the covid-19 pandemic (Wiebers & Feigin, 2020). The emergence of the pandemic has been declared a sustainability issue:

Global warming and climate change, extreme levels of pollutants in the environment (soil, water and air), deforestation, fragmentation of natural environments, intensive farming, and globalization are the factors contributing to the emergence and spread of new wave of deadly pandemics. It is very clear that the spread of novel infectious diseases like COVID-19 is an outcome of a growing global population and overexploitation of natural environments. (Arora & Mishra, 2020, p. 118)

Our planet and all life upon it currently face increasingly alarming impacts of what is now being recognised as a climate emergency (Lenton et al., 2019). Globally, economic and agricultural systems reliant on fossil fuels have exploited the earth, escalating the planetary crisis. Sea level rise along with the increased frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones, both of which are caused by global warming, threaten the viability of life on many Pacific Islands, the ancestral homes of Pacific peoples (Lawler, 2011). Humanity is thus facing a multifaceted existential crisis, with the global pandemic serving as a 'wake-up call' that cannot be ignored:

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The time has come for us to rethink our relationship with all life on this planet – other humans, nonhumans, and the earth, a life form in itself. What is good for nonhumans and the earth is virtually always in the best interests of humans, given the profound interconnectedness of all life. (Wiebers & Feigin, 2020, p. 3)

Thirty years on from the promulgation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people around the world have been increasingly vocal in calling the attention of adult decision-makers to the plight of the planet, pointing out that the endangerment and despoliation of the planet's biosphere is a violation of their right to safe and secure futures (Borner, 2019).

Because children have unique perspectives of their environment, they can be important actors in enhancing community capacity to address climate-related risks. Involving children in the design of policy and designing climate change policies with children's rights in mind are essential to creating policies that do not have unintended negative consequences. (Lawler, 2011, p. ix).

Indigenous peoples make up only 5% of the world's population, yet retain guardianship over territory that supports 80% of the planet's biodiversity (Raygorodetsky, 2018). Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledges, encapsulated in Indigenous languages and belief systems, are increasingly being recognised for their potential to contribute to a return to sustainable ways of life (Tom, Sumida Huaman, & McCarty, 2019).

As early childhood care and education professionals (teachers, teacher educators and researchers) it is important that we consider the many and varied implications of this sustainability crisis for our field and focus in particular on identifying responsive pedagogical approaches (Davis, 2014; Nolet, 2016). For this special edition we invited papers which make links between local early childhood care and education policy, programmes and practices, and international decrees such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (United Nations, 2007), the Earth Charter (The Earth Charter Initiative, 2000) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). SDG 4.7 requires that all governments:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and

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sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8)

Education for sustainable development (ESD) recognises the interconnectedness of cultural, environmental and economic sustainability, and values the longstanding and vitally important contribution of Indigenous peoples to sustaining our planet and its ecosystems through their commitment to belief systems that recognise the central importance of protecting these as the source of the wellbeing of all life. However, ESD faces challenges and tensions in balancing the competing interests of the dominant globalised neoliberal economic system, alongside the need to support the wellbeing and development of people and biodiversity within the resources of a finite planet (Kopnina, 2014).

The eight papers in this special issue are gathered from a range of countries, regions, and peoples in the Asia Pacific Region, including: the Philippines; China; Odisha, India; Hong Kong; West Java; Indonesia; and Pacific Indigenous people resident in New Zealand. It is with great appreciation to all the authors for their contribution to illuminating issues of sustainability in early childhood education that I provide the following brief overview.

Papers with a focus on education for sustainable development (ESD) include that of Li, Gaffney, Sansom and Cheng (2021). Foregrounding that 'The cultural aspects of children's lives seed learning for sustainability' (p. 31), they describe a study which aimed 'to understand children's ESD experiences in their everyday ECE environment through the lens of children's collective storytelling' (p. 32). The focus of the paper is an enquiry which began with the notion of 'Wise Use of Paper' and then segued into re-use of old newspapers from the children's homes, drawing upon the diverse cultural and historical funds of knowledge of the children's families. The study highlighted that:

Culture is a gift that is shared in the society over time, waiting to be discovered, valued, inherited, and sustained. The family's knowledge, the virtues valued in the society, and the parent-child relational connections not only infuse knowledge and habits about sustaining our environment but also preserve and carry forward the culture heritage. Culture is a treasure for ESD inherited across generations, across families. (Li et al., 2021, p. 45)

A study reported by Chan, Tesar and Lin (2021) explores issues of cultural sustainability,

in a Chinese context whereby a kindergarten is introducing western pedagogies influenced by the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). At the heart of this situation are the tensions arising from the 'complex relationship between upholding traditional and historical values and embracing new knowledge of pedagogy' (p. 70). The researchers consider that longstanding historical and cultural traditions, as well as 'the role of local knowledge and traditional parenting, learning and teaching practices in sustaining heritage' are important considerations for education systems, including teacher education, and early childhood teachers (p. 71).

Zhou (2020) explores the extent and nature of ESD implementation within a public and private kindergarten in China. This study showed that teachers had a stronger awareness of environmental sustainability than of social or economic aspects, and that most of the activities were teacher-initiated. Indonesian early childhood teachers' pedagogies for fostering climate change awareness are the focus of a study by Siron, Fajriyah, and Rahmani (2021). Establishing foundational dispositions during the early years is an important role for early childhood care and education, and concern for the impact of climate change on our environment and wellbeing is clearly one such goal.

Papers with a focus on Indigenous perspectives include one by Joshi (2021) which reports a project conducted in partnership with Indigenous communities in Odisha, in Eastern India. This study 'focused on privileging the knowledge epistemologies and eco-cultural heritage of the indigenous communities by collaborating with them as knowledge partners and drawing from close observations of community life and children in their context' (Joshi, 2021, p. 9). An important contribution of this paper is that it highlights the strengths that Indigenous children and communities can draw upon from within their own cultural paradigm, and which can be the foundation of localised curricula that validate Indigenous communities' home languages and cultures. Biana, Javier, and Jabar (2021) examine the professional capability of early childhood teachers with regard to their cultural, linguistic and indigenous competency. They recommend that teachers form closer relationships with representatives from Indigenous communities, the development of policies and frameworks to ensure they contain explicit statements of cultural and linguistic responsiveness and indigenous awareness, and the need for professional learning communities to support the integration of indigenous cultures in early childhood education.

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In a study in Choblong, a rural village near Bogor in West Java Indonesia, researchers Engliana, Prasetyo, and Nisa (2021) introduced families to traditional folktales using a story-telling approach, since they recognise that:

Creating a child-centered, action-oriented, and transformative approach through storytelling will incorporate the requisite knowledge, values, skills, and behaviors to promote sustainable development. Local culture in folktales can carry the past into the future. The history, culture, and morals of the past can be learned and used in present and future life. (p. 174)

In a similar vein, Matapo (2021) utilises a paradigm drawing from Pacific Indigenous Knowledge Systems to challenge early childhood education sustainability discourses that promote 'endangerment' thinking such as the proliferation of nature-based programmes to combat children's alienation from the natural world and the heightened safety and risk consciousness that currently dominates much early childhood care and education provision in response to the covid-19 pandemic. She concludes that their Pacific Indigenous knowledge connects Pacific Islands peoples 'to land, waters and cosmos through Indigenous creation stories, chants, dance, symbols that express co-existence and co-evolution with earth' (p. 130). Furthermore, Pacific ontologies are in contrast to western binaries that separate human cultures from nature, recognising that 'the notion of self is constituted' within a collective that comprises both 'humans and non-human others' (Matapo, 2021, p. 130).

Together, these papers make a valuable contribution to our work in the early childhood care and education sector globally, by presenting useful findings that illuminate the need for teachers to prioritise relationships with Indigenous peoples, the sustenance and inclusion of local Indigenous and traditional knowledges as blueprints for sustainability, and the recognition that the wellbeing of humanity is intertwined with the wellbeing of our planet and regional environmental contexts. As we move into 2021, still facing the dual onslaught of the global pandemic and climate emergency, it is important that these messages are shared widely. During 2020 the widespread and almost instantaneous response to the pandemic demonstrated that humanity can quickly make dramatic changes in order to protect our wellbeing. It is to be hoped that this motivation towards transformation can now also be widely applied with genuine commitment to the multiple and serious crises of social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability that

currently threaten both human and planetary life. The early childhood care and education sector, with its strong connection not only to children but intergenerationally to families and wider communities, is optimally placed to demonstrate leadership in this regard.

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