Professional Book Reviews

From Local to Global: Helping Students Make an Environmental Difference
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The books reviewed in this issue focus on literature that provides practical ideas as well as the research, theory, and philosophy necessary to realistically and critically consider the “greening” of literacy learning in classrooms. From school gardens to eco literacies to design principles for engaging students in the natural environment and environmental issues, from local to global and back again, these books represent a few from a rich and growing body of work focusing on classroom strategies that support teachers’ and students’ abilities to effect change. Each book, in its own way, provides important insights into the far-reaching impact that students and teachers can have on the future of our planet as well as on their own day-to-day lives. With a common and impressive focus on the impact of true community efforts, these books are important resources that will help teachers bring essential life-sustaining and planet-saving issues to the forefront as an important aspect of students’ growth as literate human beings who make a difference.

How to Grow a School Garden: A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers

I do not have a green thumb. I struggle to keep alive the hardiest of foliage (even ivy, a robust and low-maintenance houseplant), so the ability of others to sow, nurture, and reap never ceases to amaze me. I stare in wonder at lush gardens with their carrot tops, climbing peas, and plump tomatoes. How is it that neighbors, parks, and schools are able to produce such vivid, healthy, and alluring landscapes? To answer this question, I reviewed How to Grow a School Garden: A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers, a book grounded in practice for teachers, administrators, and, of course, for the students in our classrooms.

Arden Bucklin-Sporer and Rachel Kathleen Pringle are authors with over a decade of experience with school gardens in the San Francisco Unified School District. Bucklin-Sporer was the founding parent and first garden coordinator at Alice Fong Yu Alternative School, and Pringle was her successor. Bucklin-Sporer currently serves as the executive director and Pringle as the programs director for the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance, an organization that promotes and supports green schoolyards through the provision of resources, training, and advocacy to help schools create and sustain outdoor learning environments.

The authors begin with an explanation of why we need school gardens, emphasizing their use as outdoor classrooms, convincing teachers and parents, and simultaneously providing the justification necessary to sway administrators. They describe ways that outdoor classrooms provide authentic means for students to better understand natural systems through hands-on experiences, thus supplementing core subject learning while reconnecting with the natural
world. The authors root their ideas in a historical overview of the school garden concept and strengthen their case with a review of research that supports the benefits, such as enhancing academic achievement, promoting a healthy lifestyle, instilling environmental stewardship, encouraging community and social development, and implanting a sense of place.

The first half of How to Grow a School Garden: A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers explains how to secure, create, and develop the garden space. From the first exploratory steps to harvesting and hosting a garden party, detailed explanations guide the process. The authors pose questions that those interested in starting school gardens should ask: What are the goals of the school garden? How will this garden integrate with the core curriculum? Which standards will the garden program address?

Bucklin-Sporer and Pringle then describe the planning that is necessary before breaking ground, offering specific guidelines for involving the school district, conducting site inventories (including addressing broader environmental concerns of the schoolyard), considering necessary elements (e.g., sunlight, gathering area, pathways, tool shed, hose bibs, good soil, fencing, plants), developing garden drawings, and getting student input. When it finally comes time to dig in, they provide a detailed plan that considers costs, construction, tools, materials, leaders, volunteers, and snacks—healthy ones, of course.

The second half of this book provides guidance for the school garden to become a real outdoor classroom: locating curriculum, scheduling classes, and creating lesson plans. The authors introduce the role of a garden coordinator who focuses on teaching students and linking content standards to garden curriculum; this same person can also fill other leadership roles: garden manager, who guides students as they keep the garden in shape; garden advocate, who promotes the garden in the community; garden evaluator, who appraises the program with input from teachers and students; and garden catalyst, who may springboard the garden into greater ecology and ecosystems in the neighborhood, city, state, country, and planet.

The authors also teach how to keep an outdoor classroom healthy by using organic methods and modeling sustainable agricultural and gardening practices to maintain an ecological balance with the many creatures who will share the space. Programmatic tips are provided related to class schedules, lesson plans, classroom management, and support, as is information about tool kits, garden seats, and material recycling. They describe hosting a garden feast, offering suggestions for hygiene, set-up, cooking, and waste, and providing helpful steps to prepare for a cooking day. The book concludes as the authors reflect on the challenges and triumphs of years spent in a school garden.

Even with my admitted agricultural challenges, I feel as though I could help to grow a school garden after reading this book. Why? The tone is realistic. Bucklin-Sporer and Pringle are candid with their advice: “Do not buy hay bales to sit as they contain seed heads that can sprout oats and other grasses in your garden”; “Consider wheelchair accessible pathways”; “Let students water the garden with rainmakers made from holes punched in the bottom of milk jugs”; there is even advice regarding contaminants and products not to be used in a school garden. This book offers varied perspectives on garden-related decisions: the advantages and disadvantages of raised beds versus in-ground planting; pros and cons of direct seed versus seedlings; options for feeding soil and controlling pests. Their ability to provide multiple gardening possibilities demonstrates how such efforts need not be limited by place, space, or capital.

A vast number of resources are provided in this book, including year-round lesson plans and activities arranged by season. These are robust with objectives, materials, concepts, notes, detailed activities, and follow-up activities. Recipes are offered that tempt and tantalize: I want to taste the pasta with garlicky greens, their scissor salsa, their sauté of chard, and the lemon verbena raspberry sorbet. At the back of the book, there is a list of resources related to school garden organizations,
composting/vermicomposting, curriculum and training, environmental education, films, grants, seed suppliers, soil testing, solar energy, and wildlife. Their bibliography includes a listing of relevant children’s books.

A garden and this text are teaching tools, both of which provide learning opportunities beyond classroom walls. How to Grow a School Garden: A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers is a book to help educators understand how to grow, support, use, and sustain a school garden from the ground up. Like a garden itself, this book is ripe with vivid images (photographs) and first-person narratives that detail experiences from teachers and children. It is the fruit of a grassroots effort in which parents, teachers, and administrators collaborated and invested in a school and community. Today the San Francisco Unified School District has more than 80 school gardens and has allocated $7,000,000 for design and construction of 47 green schoolyards. How hard can it be to build and sustain a school garden? This book makes it seem easy even for an ivy killer like me. (MS)


“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, Nothing is going to get better. It’s not,” warned Dr. Seuss in The Lorax (Geisel, 1971). This message is at the heart of Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World. So, what exactly is a sustainable world? What is meant by the words sustainable, stewardship, and ecoliteracy? And what do they have to do with schools and with children? This edited volume helps readers understand these terms and their connections to schools, and it addresses two vital questions: a) How do we cultivate in children the competencies of heart and mind that they will need to create sustainable communities? b) How can we design schools as apprenticeship communities that model the practice of living sustainably?

The accounts shared in this volume are the outcome of an ongoing 10-year experiment with the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL). Located in Berkeley, California, the CEL was founded in 1995 by Peter Buckley, Fritjof Capra, and Zenobia Barlow, people guided by the belief that:

Education for sustainable living fosters both an intellectual understanding of ecology and emotional bonds with nature that make it more likely that our children will grow into responsible citizens who truly care about sustaining life, and develop a passion for applying their ecological understanding to the fundamental redesign of our technologies and social institutions, so as to bridge the current gap between human design and the ecologically sustainable systems of nature. (p. xv)

Based on the principle that in order to make change in the world people must work together, the CEL engages in collaborative partnerships with organizations sharing their vision for sustainable education. Among the types of projects that have been funded are art and poetry programs, lunch programs built around fresh food, partnerships between farms and schools, stream restoration and watershed exploration projects, and school gardens. Of the projects with which CEL has been involved, they have deemed the school garden as most suitable for children because of the direct experiences with nature that it provides.

The insights of indigenous peoples and their deep understanding and connection with the natural world are foundational to the CEL. Grounded in the En’owkin process of the Okanagan people of British Columbia, Canada, the book draws from an adaptation of that culture’s four perspectives (aligned with the four Okanagan societies: Youth, Elders, Mothers, and Fathers) on attaining sustainability. En’owkin safeguards that all decisions made by the community address the needs of the whole community; all community members have a stake in and responsibility.

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for what happens to the community; and all perspectives must be taken into account before a decision may be made. The four perspectives are translated by Okanagan elder Jeannette Armstrong, and organized around four concepts: Vision, Tradition/Place, Relationship, and Action.

The first section, Vision, provides a detailed description of the En’owkin decision-making process, a stark and important contrast to Robert’s Rules of Order (http://www.rulesonline.com). Jeannette Armstrong writes of the manner in which Robert’s Rules of Order, “in carrying out the will of the majority, often creates great disparity and injustice for the minority, which in turn leads to division, polarity, and ongoing dissension” (p. 16). In contrast, the En’owkin process involves thoughtful conversations and focused listening, the result being that all community members are well informed before making a decision about the possible action and its impact on the community.

The subsequent chapters in Vision conceptualize a sustainable future through thought, innovation, creativity, and imagination, and forward a call for “perceptual shifts” in understanding the principles of ecology and their application to education. The processes suggested are very similar to those put forward in Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice—groups of people who come together regularly to discuss a concern for something and to consider action they might take. The authors emphasize that working toward sustainability cannot be done in isolation; it requires collaboration, communication, and action.

The chapters in Tradition/Place address how to use what has been learned from the past before making decisions that will impact our collective future. It introduces the concept of nested systems and refers back to the decision-making process, En’owkin, discussed in Vision. The concept of nested systems is a fundamental ecological principle guiding the Center for Ecoliteracy; it refers to the notion that “each living system forms a whole itself, while at the same time it is part of a series of larger systems” (p. 80).

In the last chapter in this section, Helping Children Fall in Love with the Earth: Environmental Education and the Arts, the author, Pamela Michaels, answers the question: How do we help children understand concepts that are so central to Ecoliteracy? She states:

At a time when most children (in the United States, at any rate) can identify more than a thousand corporate logos but cannot name the plants or trees or birds in their own neighborhoods . . . finding ways to make the world a vibrant and interesting—and a meaningful—place for kids is critical. (p. 117)

Michaels founded River of Words, an international K–12 program that invites children to explore the importance of their own watersheds, and to express what they feel, learn, and experience through poetry and art. Through “rich sensory experiences” (p. 113), children are immersed in their communities as they explore it and use their imaginations to share their learning and feelings. Michaels writes that “cooperating on a noncontroversial arts and education project gives people tools and experience they can apply to more contentious issues later on” (p.124). This statement illustrates En’owkin, through which the community is well informed and works for the good of all.

The chapters in Relationship explore the importance of communities knowing each other in order to do the work and make the decisions that are best for the community. The authors in this section share stories from successful school partnerships. They highlight the collaborative nature of education toward a sustainable planet by actively involving children in learning and doing, and helping them see firsthand that their voices and opinions matter as contributing members of their communities. One fourth grader involved in The California Freshwater Shrimp Project wrote, “I think this project changed everything we thought we could do. I always thought kids meant nothing . . . . I feel that it did show me that kids can make a difference in the world, and we are not just little dots” (p. 174).

The chapters in the final section, Action, illustrate the myriad forms a sustainable education can take and the different ways people, including children, can take action. These actions are
grounded in the charge made by author Donella Meadows, who writes, “[E]nideavors require one to stay wide awake, pay close attention, participate flat out, and respond to feedback” (p. 195). While this is straightforward enough to follow, in education we know that many times we do not stay wide awake enough, or pay close enough attention, particularly to voices too often silenced. Thus, these action chapters play an essential role in reminding readers to do just that as we focus on engaging in responsible change for a sustainable future.

Action is a fitting conclusion to this collection of stories gathered by Stone and Barlow. They show readers that action that results in meaningful and lasting reform must begin with engaged members of the larger community, each with an active and purposeful role to play in the change process for the good of all. The Lorax indeed captures the essence of this book: “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot. Nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” (JLR)

**Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators**  

What’s the relationship between School and Mother Nature? With this question, David Sobel opens his 2008 book, *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*. His previous publication, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (2004), published by the Orion Society, is filled with stories of students learning and making a difference “through a balanced focus on economic development and environmental preservation [as] the community and its businesses get revitalized, state curriculum standards are met, and students are given invaluable opportunities to learn in real-world settings” (p. 2). In *Childhood and Nature*, Sobel draws from *Place-Based Education* and adds an important focus on the role of schools in educating children about their connection to the environment, even in a time of heightened mandates. Further, this book focuses on what it means to begin to plan for instruction by focusing on the child rather than by focusing first on the transmission of environmental facts and figures.

Sobel uses the example of No Child Left Behind mandates to discuss how teachers might focus on curricula essential to the future of our planet while working within educational systems that appear to constrain innovation. Thus, *Childhood and Nature* is an incredibly important text in helping teachers and administrators see (and trust) the possible as they engage students in taking action regarding environmental issues in and beyond their own backyards. Sobel also urges readers to insist on alternatives to conventional schooling by which “children actively learn to ‘not-think’ about the relationship between what goes on inside the school walls and outside in the social and natural communities” (p. 2). He provides many explicit examples of just how educators might make such alternatives a reality.

In the opening pages, Sobel makes explicit connections between curricular standards and curricula that support students in “getting smarter and making the community better and protecting nature” (p. 8). He builds models for teaching for environmental action that help teachers understand how such learning must begin with the experiences of the child. In Chapter Two, Sobel provides experiential descriptions as well as empirical data to communicate the importance of building children’s awareness of environmental stewardship. He emphasizes that such awareness cannot be built by memorizing sequences of facts and concepts; it must happen through children’s supported and direct experiences within the environment. Drawing on the rigor of research and the poetry of naturalists, Sobel explains why a regurgitation of correct answers to meet standards and score well on standardized tests is counterproductive to developing thoughtful citizens who understand...
their stewardship responsibilities regarding the environment.

In both poetry and in research, Sobel argues clearly and beautifully that children’s opportunities to engage with the natural world from a young age can provide an important foundation for their later development of “adult environmental ethics and behavior” (p. 18). Sobel writes, “If we want to develop environmental values, we should try to optimize the opportunity for transcendent nature experiences in middle childhood” (p. 18).

Chapter 3 provides exciting and important design principles. Sobel suggests a reverse in perspective that takes us back to the relationship between the environment and children’s interaction with it. He writes:

The classic example of this top-down mind-set in the past decade of environmental concern has been: The rain forests are disappearing; therefore let’s teach children about the horrors of rain-forest destruction so they will act to save them! Instead, I’m more interested in figuring out how to cultivate relationships between children and trees in their own backyards as a precursor to their working to save rainforests as they get older, when they can actually do something about it. Talking to trees and hiding in trees precedes saving trees. (p. 19)

Based on phenomenological studies of children at play in the natural environments, Sobel lays out seven principles—“play motifs” (p. 19)—that can be used to guide teachers in creating curriculum that starts with the child and leads to the development of an environmental consciousness. Those principles, explained through anecdotal and classroom examples, include a) adventure, b) fantasy and imagination, c) animal allies, d) maps and paths, e) special places, f) small worlds, and g) hunting and gathering. Taking us back to the elements of childhood that allow us to explore, build, examine, and learn from the natural world around us, Sobel describes these principles as tools that can support teachers in creating opportunities for students to have “compelling educational experiences [through] . . . true immersion in the natural world” (p. 57).

Chapters 4 through 11 connect the foundation built in the first chapters to a series of essays written by Sobel and previously published in various books and magazines. They were written in direct response to a curricular world that tends to remove students from their natural world. Collectively, they send essential messages about the importance of engaging students as explorers, questioners, examiners, learners, and ultimately environmentalists who have the knowledge and the passion to want to do something to save the planet and life within it. Story after story engages the reader as Sobel builds on his foundational principles to communicate ways that children can again find their “roots to the natural world” (p. 65).

The essays also provide specific and well-articulated curricular approaches for moving these principles into the classroom. In one essay, for example, Sobel describes projects emerging from cooperatives, such as New England’s CO-SEED (Community-Based School Environmental Education Project), that focus on a common “desire to bring the environment and the community into the core of the curriculum” (p. 73). Authenticity in curricular planning that addresses standards and other mandates is emphasized, and the urgency of making authenticity foundational to classroom learning is clear. In the final essay, Sobel encapsulates his message of urgency by “maximize[ing] hope” (p. 141), returning to the notion that by starting with young children and providing space and opportunity for them to engage with their environment, we are more likely to help them develop not only understandings of facts and issues but the desire to become environmentally active.

The work of early childhood educator Vivian Paley (2005, 2010) comes instantly to mind when considering Sobel’s focus on environmental education that begins with the child. Thus, he marries the best of work in early childhood education with the work of environmentalists, researchers, teachers, and poets. In doing so, he supports teachers in designing curriculum to reflect the juncture of children’s relationships with the environment, environmental activism, and learning conventional skills. In that spirit, he concludes.
his book with these words: “The best curriculum serves as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds, between play and work, between dreams and reality. The best educational system will shape adults who both love the earth and are smart and competent” (p. 154). (SL)

References

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Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE’s Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant’s teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Proposals on which two or more K–12 classroom educators have collaborated are also welcome.

Applications for the Moffett Award must include:

- A cover page with the applicant’s name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant’s current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher’s practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the project (with the understanding that these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the applicant and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2013 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org. Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by May 1, 2013. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett’s scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.