

## Book Reviews

### Making Connections through Environmental Education\*

Kath Murdoch

Institute of Education  
University of Melbourne  
Victoria

---

\* The books reviewed are:

Dufty, H and D., Dellasta (1990) *Literacy for Life* Integrating learning in the classroom, school and community.  
Clyne, M and Griffiths, R., Nelson. (1990) *The Informazing Resource Book* Reading and Writing Non Fiction.

---

"Children are innately curious. They are also noble and active. They want to be involved with the things that matter. The average primary school child has a white horse tied up at the end of the playground and is willing to mount it and get involved with society's growth and development. This is their right and their inheritance."

(Margaret Simpson, *Literacy For Life* p 27)

The recent growth of interest in environmental education amongst teachers has generated an increasing array of resources and reference books purporting to provide assistance in planning and teaching in the area. Of the material I have examined recently, two books have emerged as offering real value to educators in this field although, ironically, neither has been written with that specific purpose in mind. Environmental education was integral to rather than being the focus of each book. The two books, *Literacy for Life* and *The Informazing Resource Book* have been written with different purposes and for different audiences yet they share a common, broad goal of empowering students for life through literacy. Both books provide practical and theoretical insights into ways in which teachers can help children untie their 'white horses' and ride.

Margaret Clyne and Rachel Griffiths have compiled *The Informazing Resource Book* as an accompaniment to Steve Moline's popular series of big books for primary students, *Informazing* (also published by Nelson). Many of the titles in the informazing series provide excellent opportunities for the development integrated units based around environmental concepts and understandings. Titles such as *Earth in Danger*, *Tadpole Diary* *Millions of Years Ago*, *Somewhere in the Universe* and *Hidden Animals* are just some that explore concepts central to environmental education such as change, adaptation, conservation, diversity.

The activities in the resource book link to each of the big books in the series and offer ideas for working with the information provided by each text. The activities aim to refine children's conceptual framework of 'how the world works' along with the development of competency in literacy. Although the resource book is written for the *Informazing* series, many of the strategies and approaches suggested stand alone as useful ways of working with information and developing scientific and environmental literacy with young children.

The strategies outlined in the book also reflect a range of approaches fundamental to environmental education. Many of the activities emphasise the provision of hands on experiences for the learner; involve direct experiences in the outdoors; foster co-operative learning; integrate a range of curriculum areas; encourage open questioning; explore points of view and develop skills in inquiry and investigation. Some activities, however, tend to communicate 'mixed messages' about caring for the environment. For example, the topics covered in the series often lead to the exploration of natural materials and living things. This is perhaps too often done by collecting things from the environment rather than encouraging examination *in* the environment. A teacher familiar with the ethics of working in environmental education, however, would quickly see opportunities to modify the way such activities were carried out.

In its treatment of some topics, *The Informazing Resource Book* offers many springboards for making connections to broader environmental concepts and issues. One good example of this is the sequence of activities suggested for using the book *Millions of Years Ago* - a book which takes the reader "on a journey through time starting 3,500 million years ago when life on Earth began." (p 30). The activities associated with this book culminate in an investigation of endangered and extinct animals and encourage children to examine possible causes of endangerment. There are a number of instances, however, where such connections are not made, despite the relevance of the content of many of the titles. *Somewhere in the Universe*, for example is a simple but powerful book which helps the child see him or herself within the context of the universe. The accompanying activities focus mainly on mapping skills and, although the activities are worthwhile in themselves, the opportunity for exploring some of the wider, human issues about our 'place' on the planet and within the universe is not taken up. There are similar instances throughout the resource book where I felt the authors could have taken the activity sequence one step further and made much more powerful connections between the books' content, the environment and the child. Again, however, teachers who are familiar with environmental education may quickly see such "connecting" opportunities and develop extension activities for themselves.

The strength of *The Informazing Resource Book*, I believe, is that it encourages teachers to help children approach and work with information about their world in a range of ways and does not underestimate children's curiosity, willingness to explore and capacity for dealing with significant issues and concepts. Scientific and environmental understandings are developed together with literacy skills through inquiry activities which are accessible and on the whole clearly explained.

As with the *Informazing* series itself, *The Informazing Resource Book* is lavishly produced. In full colour, it provides a well laid out text with dozens of supportive photos of teachers and children at work actually carrying out the activities. By organising the activities under the broad topics of *prehistory, animal puzzles, life cycles, the body, space and the future*, teachers are encouraged to develop units around broader understandings as well as allowing each book to be dealt with in isolation. For teachers getting started in environmental education, portions of the informazing series and resource book may offer an interesting entry point. For those already working in the field they will provide further ideas for curriculum integration and environmental investigations with young children.

*Literacy for Life*, edited by Helen and David Dufty (authors of *Greenhouse Alert!* 1989) offers a series of case studies illustrating the implementation of integrated, holistic approaches to learning in schools. It explores the fundamental links between literacy and life as explained by Sandra Newell and Bev Stubbs:

All life is interconnected. Literacy for life assists people to see connections between themselves and all life on the planet. Ultimately the quality of life is dependent on the quality of people's relationships with each other and the environment.(p 17)

Each case study outlines ways in which these connections can be fostered in schools. Many of the studies are real-life examples of the potential for *environmental education* to be an effective vehicle for making connections across the curriculum and between schools and the community. The book celebrates the achievements of each school and in, so doing, should stimulate readers to take action or make change in their own setting.

The first three chapters, written by Helen and David Dufty, Bob Walshe, Sandra Newell and Bev Stubbs respectively, provide a useful theoretical and philosophical overview of holistic learning. Grounded in a transformative view of education, the authors stress the need to break down the barriers erected between various fields of knowledge and emphasise approaches which help learners perceive their world 'as a set of interconnections within a total system.' (Dufty, p 6). Each of these chapters also emphasises the need to focus on the "important not the trivial" (Newell and Stubbs, p 16) with the underlying assumption being that much of what goes on in classrooms tends towards the latter. This notion is supported in the following case studies which demonstrate the extent to which children can not only deal with basic and profound ideas about their world but become willing and motivated to act on their learning in ways that matter. As noted by Margaret Simpson,

"Children were excited and elated to have their research accepted as legitimate and useful to the debate on the welfare of our community, and indeed our planet."(p 43)

Although the first three chapters provide an overview only, they are certainly enough to whet the willing reader's appetite for change. This section may also

assist teachers involved in planning for environmental education at the school policy level.

Many of the contributing authors of the subsequent case studies are familiar to the field of environmental education. David Tribe, for example, discusses Manly Vale public school's environmental education program, Margaret Simpson outlines of the whole school approach to preparing for 'greenhouse alert day' at Sylvania public school and Vie Foster describes the use of networking to co-ordinate a greenhouse program and rally linking local Canberra schools and the community. The accounts are descriptive and reflective in nature. Although they are not immediately practical as teaching resources, some of the accounts in the book provide reasonably specific information about the way particular programs were initiated and carried out with accompanying examples of students work. Reading through each account, teachers in other settings may found such information a useful stimulus or starting point for developing their own program.

To a seasoned "environmental educator" the approaches outlined in *Literacy for Life* will not be new. What is interesting, however, is that each case study has arisen from the perspective of concern for developing literacy skills. The value of environmental education has been recognised in many case-studies as a powerful way of integrating learning to develop these skills in context. Further to this, each study captures, to varying degrees, the connections between knowledge, values, skills and action in a real-life (and Australian!) context. Overall, the strength of each case study lies in the realistic and practical way they demonstrate commitment to a socially critical and transformative curriculum.

*Literacy for Life* is quite well produced and provides reasonable, visual access for the reader. Sub-headings, graphics and other organisational devices assist in breaking up what can be, at times, quite dense text. The book tends to finish rather abruptly. I felt that it would have been useful to include a final section that pulled together some of the common threads underlying the case studies and raised some key questions about the organisation of curriculum in schools and the place of areas such as environmental education. Implicit in each case study is a challenge to existing systems and accepted ways of working. By drawing on examples from each case study, such challenges and possible directions for change could have been more fully explored and this may have provided further incentives and directions for the reader to transfer ideas to their own working context.

The quality of environmental education in schools is ultimately marked by the extent to which learners can make connections between themselves, others, culture, society and the environment and are willing to take action based on that understanding. As teachers face the pressure of an increasingly crowded curriculum, the cause of environmental education is well served by resources that assist them in helping children make such connections.