

EDITORIAL

***AJEE* Special Issue—18th AAEE Biennial Conference, Hobart, Tasmania, November 2–5, 2014 Sustainability: Smart Strategies for the 21st Century**

In early November 2014, over 300 delegates met in Hobart, Tasmania for the 18th Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) Biennial Conference. Titled ‘Sustainability: Smart Strategies for the 21st Century’, this conference sought to bring together innovative thinking, practice and research in the field of environmental and sustainability education. This special conference issue of the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* captures a snapshot of some of that thinking. While it is by no means a comprehensive account of the many conversation threads that permeated the conference, we hope that readers will find the articles in this special issue a stimulus to your thinking and practice.

This special issue is structured in two sections: Section 1 contains three articles related specifically to the inaugural AAEE Research Symposium, and the second section has articles related to presentations made at the main conference. Prior to providing an overview of the articles in this section, we feel it is incumbent on us to provide some additional context to the Research Symposium in particular.

The inaugural Australian Environmental Education Association Research Symposium, titled ‘It’s About Dialogue and It’s About Time’, was hosted by the University of Tasmania in early November 2014 preceding the AAEE biennial conference. Over 90 people attended from a variety of backgrounds, including academics (early, mid and late career), doctoral candidates, and educators/practitioners with an interest in research. This broad support for the symposium from the EE/SE field in Australasia and the input into planning and organisation from a range of people was a signal of the need for such an event.

The symposium aimed to be a dialogical, interactive event that contributed to the development and growth of the environmental and sustainability education (EE and SE) research communities in Australasia. The format sought to provide the space and opportunity for robust dialogue, capacity building, and networking on research in environmental and sustainability education, and in related fields. The symposium deliberately excluded traditional presentations about a specific research project or ‘papers’ on a research topic. Rather, the focus was on a series of creative, participatory, collegial, and critical dialogues about research, research development, and research challenges for the field.

In order to promote and maintain the spirit and practice of dialogue some key values underpinned the symposium:

- Commitment to open inquiry and reflexivity;
- Expression of critical sensitivity to research, its development and challenges;
- Non-hierarchical and participatory formats;
- Emphasis on interactions that are nurturing, in good humour, and ‘ego-free’;
- Anticipation of generosity and collegiality towards others and their scholarship;

- Inclusivity to those with a genuine interest in developing EE/SE research.

The research symposium was structured around three themes:

1. Key research questions in EE/SE: What are they? How are they evolving?
2. Research utilisation and the impact of EE/SE research;
3. Interdisciplinary and multidimensional aspects of researching EE/SE.

Delegates of the symposium were offered an opportunity to submit a short paper to this special issue of the *AJEE*, reflecting on the symposium and its contribution to and/or position with the EE/SE research field. The three articles that follow this editorial take the opportunity to critically engage with the themes, dialogues, and structures of the research symposium and provide some interesting provocations about future implications for research in EE/SE.

First, Bob Stevenson, Jo-Anne Ferreira, and Sherridan Emery provide insights into historical trajectories and future directions for the EE/SE research field in Australasia from the perspective of an esteemed experienced researcher, an accomplished mid-career researcher, and a motivated emerging researcher. In doing so, Stevenson and colleagues uphold the importance of historical perspectives while encouraging researchers to think critically about historically generated knowledge through EE/SE research in ways that are attentive to issues of the present. The second article picks up the baton of thinking critically about research in our field to ask some provocative questions about the Research Symposium itself and the historically situated power structures that inevitably informed the organisation of the symposium. These questions from four PhD candidates, Kim Beasy, Leah Page, Sherridan Emery & Ian Ayre, encourage us to rethink notions of dialogue and collaboration in EE/SE research and how these principles might become more visible in our research field. The final article of the Research Symposium section is from a large group of emerging researchers. Spurred by collaborative inquiry and David Orr's call to consider how research might be more 'dangerous', Claudio Agauyo, Blanche Higgins, Ellen Field, Jennifer Nicholls, Sangion Appiee Tiu, Maia Osborn, Farshad Hashemzadeh, Kevin Kezabu Lubuulwa, Mark Boulet, Belinda Christie & Jeremy Mah reflect on the question of what is worth researching in EE/SE in the context of the Anthropocene.

We are grateful to not only the authors who contributed to the Research Symposium section of this special issue, but also to everyone who contributed so positively to a rich and energising event. As co-convenors of the inaugural AAEE Research Symposium, along with Alan Reid, we realise that first steps are often characterised by uncertainty and stumbling. We hope that as this important forum evolves, it proves to be a significant contributor to building capacity and collaboration in the EE/SE research community in Australasia and beyond.

The second section of this special issue contains eight articles developed from presentations at the AAEE Biennial Conference. We kick off this section with a 'big ideas', theoretically robust paper by Annette Gough and Noel Gough. They ask important and unsettling questions about the ways that 'environment' has been conceptualised in environmental education and education for sustainability discourses since the 1970s. Using Jean-Luc Nancy's (2007) work, they explore the increasingly dominant instrumentalisation of nature that is reinforced by 'ecotechnologies'. They conclude their article with a 'wake-up call' for educators and researchers to '(re)engage their programs in the ways in which the world is being technologically enframed and denatured ... and to (re)assert the importance of the environment in environmental education'.

The next two articles pick up on some of the Gough's ideas and ask similar questions about understandings of nature and children's relationships with nature. Karen Malone uses new materialist and post-humanist approaches to explore ways that we might disrupt anthropocentric views of childhood/children and the 'new nature movement'. She makes a compelling case that these narratives paint nature as an inanimate object

and that they serve to reinforce children as being separate from nature. Drawing from her experience of working with children in La Paz, Bolivia, Malone shows us how it is possible to challenge and revision current assumptions that underpin the child in nature movement. The next article, by Sue Elliot and Tracy Young, also takes a critical look at the romanticised notion of children's experiences with nature as they question the 'nature by default paradigm' that permeates early childhood contexts (ECE). They invite us to reconsider our understandings of children's relationships with nature in ECE as a way to move to deeper possibilities for ECE and sustainability.

In the following three articles, we shift perspectives and move away from children and take a close look at the ways that teacher education programs specifically and higher education institutions generally support embedding of education for sustainability (EfS) in curriculum. Snowy Evans, Jo-Anne Ferreira, Julie Davis, and Bob Stevenson report on a study that explores the ways that teacher education courses can support teachers to understand EfS, and in doing so, enact some of the big ideas from the previous papers. They profile a system-wide framework in Queensland and offers strategies, exemplars, insights and resources for others who want to implement EfS in a systematic and coherent manner in teacher education courses. Debbie Prescott's article also reports on research related to sustainability in initial teacher education through focusing on innovation in learning and teaching design. In this article, she explores how environmental sustainability was weaved into literacy and numeracy oriented units through assessment tasks focusing on contextual cues, collaborative learning, complex task and reflexivity. Picking up on the complexity theme, the article by Blanche Higgins and Ian Thomas takes an even wider perspective, exploring the ways that universities generally deliver EfS, noting the complexities that influence curriculum change.

The final two articles shift contexts from higher education to other post-secondary and workplace contexts. Bedi Gitanjali and Susan Germein evaluate the impact and effectiveness of a nationwide professional development program to upskill VET practitioners in EfS pedagogy. They explore the impact of the program on VET practitioners, noting the myriad benefits that emerge from the program. Mark Boulet and Keith Davis add to this conversation with an exciting and inspirational case study of an innovative workplace training program that uses a 'head, hands, heart and feet' learning framework for creating change agents within workplaces that can influence organisational culture in relation to sustainability.

As is to be expected, there are many ideas from both the research symposium and the conference that are *not* represented in this special issue. Rather, this collection represents a small number of articles from authors mostly from academic contexts who chose to submit to this special issue. There are many other important stories, findings and innovations happening all across Australia — by teachers and educators in a range of educational contexts, by not-for-profit organisations, by all levels of government, and by the private sector that were profiled in Hobart. Their stories are not contained in this special issue and that's a shame — so we encourage you to check out their presentations for a quick summary of their exciting work (<http://www.aee.org.au/publication/2008-2/>).

Individually and collectively, these 11 articles present clear evidence that innovative, provocative and, at times, unsettling work is happening in a variety of Australian educational and research contexts. These articles can be used as a springboard for both delegates who attended the conference and those who were not able to attend; they can be used to prompt think about one's assumptions, practices, teaching and research. We hope you will find this issue as inspiring and thought provoking as we did in pulling it together. We wholeheartedly believe that this collection is testament to the fact that there are critical, creative and boundary-pushing conversations taking place in Australia that stand to influence the global EE and EfS conversations.

Reference

Nancy, J.-L. (2007). *The creation of the world or globalization* (F. Raffoul; D. Pettigrew, Trans.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

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