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Young Children's Play and Environmental Education in Early Childhood Education

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Amy Cutter-Mackenzie
Susan Edwards · Deborah Moore
Wendy Boyd

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Amy Cutter-Mackenzie
School of Education
Southern Cross University
Coolangatta, QLD
Australia

Wendy Boyd
School of Education
Southern Cross University
Lismore, NSW
Australia

Susan Edwards
Deborah Moore
Faculty of Education
Australian Catholic University
Fitzroy, Melbourne, VIC
Australia

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Chapter 1
A Challenge for Early Childhood Environmental Education?

Abstract This chapter orients the reader by introducing the underlying premise of the book, in addition to outlining the remaining six chapters. The book's foundation lies squarely in an era in which environmental education has been described as one of the most pressing educational concerns of our time, leading to the critical need for further insights in understanding how best to approach the learning and teaching of environmental education in early childhood education. In this chapter and indeed this book more broadly we address this concern by identifying two principles for applying play-based learning in early childhood environmental education. The principles we identify are the result of research conducted with teachers and children using three different types of play-based learning, namely open-ended play, modelled-play and purposefully framed play. Such play types connect with the historical use of play-based learning in early childhood education as a basis for pedagogy.

1.1 Introduction

Four children assembled around a wading pool at a preschool are intently engaged in play. Samples collected during a recent excursion to their local beach are the focus of attention. Seaweeds and sponges have been combined with plastic sea animals and placed in the wading pool with a small amount of water to help the children learn aspects of biodiversity. The children introduce well-known characters from a Nickelodeon™ cartoon, and one of the sponges becomes SpongeBob Squarepants™, whilst a plastic sea star morphs into his sidekick Patrick. Seaweed is heaped upon both SpongeBob and Patrick by two of the children. The remaining children swirl the water vigorously with sticks gathered from a nearby tree, creating whirlpools that lift seaweed from SpongeBob and Patrick. Seth (the teacher) observed the children at play, noting the appropriateness of their social interactions and the sophisticated articulation of the cartoon genre to their SpongeBob SquarePants dramatisation.

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