

COMMUNICATION

Urgency through education: Futures learning through children’s literature

Glenn Auld , Joanne O’Mara  and Peta J. White 

Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Corresponding author: Glenn Auld; Email: glenn.auld@deakin.edu.au

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Abstract

The purpose of this communication is to explore possibilities for children’s literature to enable futures learning. It introduces the ways in which two different frameworks might be used to analyse children’s literature. The first framework draws upon the Earth Charter Principles (ECP) (Auld et al., 2021). The second framework brings together the pillars of sustainability with the principles of Education for Sustainability (EfS) in a framework for ecological sustainability of children’s literature (White et al., 2020). The communication starts by introducing a text – a recent example of ‘awarded’ and therefore high-quality children’s literature. We then outline the two frameworks and explore the possibilities of applying these frames for analysing this text. We conclude that the sustainability frameworks are useful tools and resources for analysing children’s literature to determine the quality of the text and how the experience of reading the text may impact children, their learning and their environmental consciousness and practices.

Introducing One Potoroo: A Story of Survival

In this communication article, we analyse “One Potoroo: A story of survival” by Penny Jaye and Alicia Rogerson (2021) (Figure 1). This is a valuable text, published by CSIRO, that enables intergenerational discourse relating to some of our greatest ecological crises: biodiversity loss, mammalian extinction and the climate impact of increasing intensity and occurrence of fire. We begin by recapping the narrative of the text.

Located in Two Peoples Bay in the southwest of Western Australia, a lightning strikes starts a fire and a small Potoroo successfully hides and although damaged, survives. This narrative is written from his perspective. He is then found by humans, treated for burns, and relocated to unburned Waychinicup National Park approximately 20 kilometers away. The Potoroo explores and finds a new family in the new environment.

The short narrative is beautifully illustrated with coloured paintings (by Alicia Rogerson) that are supported by text to evoke strong emotions of concern and devastation on the first page – depicting the fire. This context of climate impact then shifts into one of human concern and management. The book then includes two pages of information about the Potoroo, such as diet, history of knowledge about the Potoroo including Noongar name/knowledge – Ngilkat, population details and species diversity (this genus diversified into three species that are geographically isolated: WA, Qld, NSW/Vic).

The global role of children’s literature is aspirational, and so is often future focused on what might be, what is yet to come or a sense of individual becoming for the protagonist. High-quality

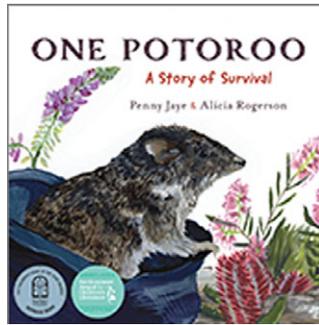


Figure 1. The book “One Potoroo: A story of survival” by Penny Jaye and illustrated by Alicia Rogerson, published by CSIRO in 2021.

(often represented through winning awards) children’s literature has an intergenerational appeal with books often being read many years after the initial publication. The ideologies, characters and messages in the text often have a timeless quality that enables them to live into the future. This aspect of timelessness and universality is often part of the criteria for awards in children’s literature. The concept of “standing the test of time” lends itself to exploring the ideological underpinnings of the text, as when these are not aligned with societal norms or expectations then the text is either no longer as relevant or may become offensive and dislocated from the society’s aspirations for childhood (Auld et al., 2021). Futures learning for children can be mediated through the ideologies in children’s literature about sustainability. Issues of social and ecological justice and sustainability can be supported by educators, parents and caregivers with high-quality children’s literature.

Approach One: Using the Earth Charter to Consider a Children’s Text

The Earth Charter proposes a framework of responsibility for “a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace” (Earth Charter International, 2000–2020). In earlier work, Auld et al. (2021) revisited the importance of ideological representations in children’s literature using the Earth Charter as a foundation. We considered an award-winning text and found some challenges in the ideological framing. While the expectation that a single text might attend to every aspect of the Earth Charter is impractical, we should be able to guarantee that violations leading to discourses that undermine sustainable principles are not present.

In this communication, we will take the adaption we made of McCallum and Stephens’ (2011) ideological framing of children’s literature (Auld et al., 2021) to analyse the text, *One Potoroo*. We developed a series of four possible questions that can be used to determine quality in children’s literature. In developing these questions, we took into consideration both the ECP and the frameworks used in judging high-quality children’s literature. We constructed four questions for the analysis of judging children’s literature, with reference to futures learning. The following four headings have been adapted from these questions for the analysis of the *One Potoroo* text.

Alignment of characters with the ECP

This concerns each character’s subject position in the text and thinking about how their viewpoints align with the ECP. In some cases, a character may position themselves counter to the ECP, but the text itself will show that this is a flawed position. In *One Potoroo*, the Potoroo is

the central character of the text, who is joined by a human character at the end of the story. The Potoroo is portrayed as vulnerable and in need of help. The human character is portrayed as a rescuer, caring for the Potoroo and then releasing it back to its habitat when it is healed. The agency of the human subject was never in doubt in the story, and the Potoroo was dependent upon the human for its safety. The text considers the agency of the human character in looking after the Potoroo after the fire, however in the framing of the story there is never information about why the Potoroo is an endangered species, so there is a biased subject position on humans when the reason for the vulnerability of the species and the increase in number and intensity of fire events was never named.

Alignment of the themes with the ECP

In this section, we consider how the themes align with the ECP. Themes are ideas that surround the story, are constructed and promoted within the text. Many themes provide educative opportunities for children as they engage with children's literature. When children read texts, they are left with the thematic messages embedded in the text as part of their learning from the reading experience. In *One Potoroo*, the theme of more-than-human other vulnerability is introduced at the beginning of the text with the arrival of the intense bushfire. Both the Potoroo and its habitat are endangered. A second theme is the luck involved in survival. The text sends messages to students that if the conservationists were not there, the Potoroo would not have survived. The text also has a strong call to action and reinforces the idea of human agency and the responsibility for humans to care for native animals. In the text, these themes of habitat conservation are clearly identified in the images and storyline. Conservation is shown as a necessary practice that enables survival of this Potoroo without doing anything ongoing that might save the species, or which disrupts the situation that leads to the events that cause the vulnerability of the species.

Alignment of the plot with the ECP

The plot in children's literature provides a logic and framing for the story to unfold. Children engage in the story when they have opportunities to connect to the imaginings and learnings embedded in the text. In the *One Potoroo* text, the plot follows the time after the bushfire when the habitat is regenerating. The human characters are portrayed as kind to the individual animals and their actions are critical to the survival of the individual Potoroos they encounter. Many children will probably connect to the opportunity to look after a fluffy vulnerable animal as part of their childhood experience. Perhaps the text engenders some sort of socialisation into the role of conservationists "doing good" to save species from extinction.

Resolving any malalignments with the ECP in the text

The final part of the framing considers the ways in which any transgressions of the ECP are resolved in the text. The depiction of transgressions is a way that children's literature often makes a point or highlights certain ideas and behaviours. A transgression that upheld the ECP for example, might be where a character acts unsustainability at the beginning of the text, but resolves this transgression by coming to know the ways that their behaviour was not good for the planet. In *One Potoroo*, there are no resolutions of malalignments with the ECP. However, the intense bushfires at the start are not resolved, and the entangled relationships that humans have with habitats and species is not explored in detail.

Approach Two: Using a Framework of Ecological Sustainability of Children's Literature

An additional way to approach the analysis of children's literature for futures learning is to use a framework of ecological sustainability. We constructed a framework for ecological sustainability of children's literature (White et al., 2020) (Table 1) where the principles of EfS (Australian Government, 2009) are critically related to the three pillars of Sustainability (United Nations Environment Programme and World Wildlife Fund for Nature, 1991). The intent was to offer authors, illustrators and editors a framework for designing children's literature that could be valuable in context, content and that models the need for ecological sustainability as a priority in all areas, especially in the Global North (Lee et al., 2023). The framework also encouraged librarians, teachers and parents to be selective in the texts they offer their young people and children, ensuring that the principles of ecological sustainability are clear, reflective of the polycrisis we have generated and reinforced in ways that lead to changes in social discourse through intergenerational storytelling. The framework poses a series of questions that are generated from intersecting principles of EfS and pillars of sustainability.

Transformation and change

Transformation and change involve people having the capacity to manage change in an organisation, industry or community that leads towards sustainable practices and futures. When we apply these ideals to *One Potoroo*, we note that the text educates children about changing habitats but with no direct link to the cause of why these habitats are changing. It offers one case study in one habitat without a broader analysis or introduction of ideas that contextualise the larger transformations that are taking place across organisations, industries and communities that require urgent educational interventions.

Education for all and lifelong learning

Education is central to the enactment of sustainability in terms of educating towards sustainable futures. Education in the broad sense covers all people of all ages from all backgrounds in all contexts, including informal learning interactions. *One Potoroo* showcases the important role of conservationists. It also illustrates ways of intergenerational learning through the involvement of the young people in the Potoroo's rehabilitation.

Systems thinking

Systems thinking is about encouraging people to understand the environmental political, economic and social systems and how they are inter-related. *One Potoroo* values the work of conservationists, and this is presented in terms of a rescue mission. However, the anthropogenic values that have led to the destruction of the habitat are not present in the text.

Envisioning a better future

This value positions people as having a shared vision as they work together towards a sustainable future. The conservationists in the text demonstrate a sense of hope and collaboration towards saving the Potoroos from extinction. In the saving of this one Potoroo, there is a strong feeling of hope represented in the text.

Table 1. Framework for ecological sustainability of children's literature (White *et al.*, 2020, p.149)

		Pillars of Sustainability (IUCN/UNEP/WWF 2009)		
Principles of education for sustainability (Australian Government, 2009)	Transformation and change	Economics	Environment	Society
		Are representations of consumerism (bigger, better, faster, more) transformed with more sustainable choices?	Are environments respected for having intrinsic value (rather than economic opportunity)?	Are suggestions and examples for learning embedded in a culture of sustainability?
	Education for all and lifelong learning	Is sustainability in workplaces represented in the text?	Are examples of learning from the environment represented in the text?	Is intergenerational learning about sustainability valued in the text?
	Systems thinking	Are economic choices balanced by environmental and social ethics in the text?	Are environmental systems valued in the ideologies in the text?	Are negative social systems challenged in the cultural representations in the text?
	Envisioning a better future	Is the economic system presented as becoming more sustainable?	Are aspects of the environment represented as integral in a better future?	Does the vision of a better future arise from or rely on social interaction?
	Critical thinking and reflection	Is the economic system critically challenged? Are alternative systems represented or considered?	Are all beings considered equal? Are natural spaces valued? Are some beings or practices more valued, anthropomorphised or marginalised? Are problems and evidence of the problems/issues identified?	Is there a culture of equity and social justice embedded in the textual representations? What processes are used and do these reflect socially acceptable decision making processes?
	Participation	What action is represented as important to develop a better future?	Are the characters appropriately interacting with the environment or elements of the environment (in meaningful ways)?	Are individuals encouraged to work together? Are intercultural understandings encouraged to value diversity?
	Partnerships for change	Are partnerships leading to better (more sustainable) choices/practices? Are all printing options considered for sustainability practices first?	Are partnerships illuminating changes towards more sustainable choices/practices? Could the paper source / choice be considered?	Are networks and relationships leading to cultural changes that are more sustainable? Who does the labour? Where is the printing done and how much transport is required – could this be localised?

Critical thinking and reflection

Critical thinking challenges the ways in which individuals and groups interpret and engage with the world. This is particularly important in disrupting anthropogenic practices that are destroying habitats. In *One Potoroo*, the conservationists are acting within their values, but the conversation does not go beyond the immediate danger of these species. There is no critique of the system or the structures that have led to Potoroo's current the situation. The reflection offers no reasoning as to why these events have occurred.

Participation

Participation is critical for groups and individuals to act in sustainable ways. In the text, the action of saving the Potoroo is represented as an important way to develop a better future that requires multiple people to work together.

Partnerships for change

Partnerships are necessary to develop a diverse range of networks that can improve communication across different sectors of society. For example, the network of scientists caring for, mapping, collecting and analysing data. The conversation effort is coordinated and supported by State government agencies and committed community groups.

Discussion and Conclusions

By analysing *One Potoroo* using both the ECP and the principles of EfS frameworks, we can see that the text has strong positive messages about the role of conservationists and the importance of saving a species. These frames make evident, however, that while the text does this work, it does not open conversations about the structures that contextualise broader ecological crises that have led to the endangerment of the Potoroo. While these are represented in the first few pages of the text, where we see the fires raging, the intensification of climate change induced extreme weather events is not pointed out or indicated in the narrative text. Additionally, the text positions humans as the saviours, even though what is being saved is limited, and the need for saving is human induced / generated.

There is a scientific explanation of the Potoroo's habitat with species details at the end of the text and the measures which are being taken to save it. The text alludes to the impacts of colonisation through talking briefly about feral foxes and cats and the terrible impacts that they are having through their hunting and killing of the Potoroos. But the extent and depth of habitat destruction are not addressed in detail.

The practice of conserving the habitat and the custodianship of the Potoroo as a species has been evident at Two Peoples Bay for thousands of generations. Indigenous Knowledges underpin the custodianship of the human and more-than-human relations with Country. The text silences this aspect of conservation that has served the Potoroo for tens of thousands of years. The relationship the Potoroo has with the traditional fire management practices, and the subsequent regrowth and regeneration from these practices, were not referred to in the text. This silencing of Indigenous Knowledges occurring for time immemorial on the lands, and the true histories of the importance of this custodianship for the more-than-human other in so-called Australia, is a silence in the frameworks that we have highlighted. We hope for better from our children's literature.

When reading children's literature for futures learning, we should be noticing where Indigenous Knowledges are positioned in the themes, characters and plot in the text. Where Indigenous Knowledges are not represented in the text, we are in a sense eliminating the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have played in their

custodianship of the land. Similarly, we should also consider the agency of characters (not just the dominance of humans) and the role humans have played in generating the situations where animals require removal from their habitat and re-location in nearby areas.

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Glenn Auld works at Deakin University in Language and Literacy education. He seeks out the limits of enacting social justice in literacy education on stolen land in neoliberal times.

Joanne O'Mara is an associate professor of Education at Deakin University. An experienced secondary English and Drama teacher, having taught in city and regional schools in Victoria as well as in Vanuatu, she is the Chair of Secondary English Curriculum Inquiry.

Peta J. White is an associate professor in science and environmental education at Deakin University. Her current research follows three narratives: science and biology education; sustainability, environmental, and climate change education; and collaborative/activist methodologies and embodied research practice.