

Volume 38 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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BOOK REVIEW: *TRANSFORMATIVE
SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION:
REIMAGINING OUR FUTURE*

Shauna Butterwick

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
Special Edition Editors: Jennifer Sumner and Emily Dobrich
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

38,1 June/juin 2026, 105–107
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

BOOK REVIEW: TRANSFORMATIVE SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION: REIMAGINING OUR FUTURE

Elizabeth Lange. Taylor and Francis. 2023. 468 pages.

Elizabeth Lange's thoroughly researched and detailed account describes how separation from nature is a key pillar of Western worldviews. Relationality, not separation, is the way forward. To know our way forward is to look back. Lange's text is a call to transformative environmental educators "to be critical students of history, including root causes of issues, social movements, and ongoing social change" (p. 103).

In the first three chapters, the beginnings of Western society and worldviews are described, illustrating how colonialism and industrialization came into being. Individualism, unfettered progress, and separation from nature we now understand as the foundations of this latest epoch, the Anthropocene, a time when human actions are the key leavers of ecological destruction. In chapter four, Lange describes the rise of both environmental movements and environmental education (EE), noting the diverse voices and debates, reminding us that environmental concerns have existed for centuries. EE has become more formalized with the development of school-based and higher education curricula, although these two EE sites are delinked, limiting opportunities for transformative change. Lange further argues that to fully understand this epoch, it is imperative to see how closely tied it is to colonization and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. "The fortunes of Indigenous people and people of colour as well as the nonhuman and more-than-human worlds have always been woven together" (p. 199).

Lange explores how well-known environmental advocacy measures, such as the establishment of national parks, reflect a separatist view in which we are not *of* nature, rather it was something to be *enjoyed*. These parks also involved the removal of Indigenous peoples from lands necessary for their survival. The race, class and gender face of such environmental protection practices continues to be misrecognized with "little effort to incorporate social justice concerns into environmental agendas" (p. 121). There have been numerous efforts to define EE in its emergence as an academic and communication field. Confusion continues to frame efforts to understand differences between ecology and environment. Ecology is oriented to relationality, a view that "all the relationships interlink all members of the Earth Household" (p. 134). Lange maps out the many strands of EE including adult education approaches.

In chapter five, sustainability education is explored as a concept emerging alongside both educational and environmental crisis, fueled by austerity measures. EE has yet to become a mass educational endeavor. While education for sustainable development (ESD) shows much promise, it has been dominated by instrumental rationality. A transformative

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approach to EE in which education is orientated towards relationality, not separation, is at the heart of Lange’s text which involves relearning. Quantum physics has contributed to this reimagining of the universe. Instead of a mechanistic worldview, quantum physics now shows how “form, matter, time, and space ... are dynamic and constantly changing” (p. 263). These interrelationships are captured by Fritjof Capra in his principles of ecology: nature sustains life through networks, nested systems, cycles, flows, development and dynamic balance (see p. 276). This relational orientation contrasts with conventional science in which, for example, trees are considered as isolated entities in competition¹.

Stories are essential to transformative sustainability education. It is stories that capture this complex interrelationality. The story of modernity is losing its grip as a new story of relationality emerges. In the seventh chapter, the development of formal education systems is examined, systems which now need repurposing to reflect how we live in a pluriverse. This is “not a call for a unitary approach but rather a call to educators to engage learning that creates conditions for the planet to heal, appropriate to each specific context ... a polyarchy of ways to live relationally” (p. 306). As Charles Taylor argues, the modern Western world is a social imaginary promoted through images, stories and art, as well as media (see p. 306).

Transformation involves making the underpinnings of this social imaginary visible, particularly the concepts of private property, profit and power and how deprivation, rather than collaboration, is central to these orientations. The potential of individualism for mutual benefit has been lost in the move to a competitive economic system². Lange continues with her examination of education, noting its role in upholding the Western social imaginary, a powerful tool for proselytizing and civilizing. Mass schooling, for example, is a process of socialization promoting class structure, rationality, and technical and scientific authority (see p. 315). Recent educational reforms, fueled by neoliberal agendas, uphold particular economic theories resulting in the narrowing of the purposes of education.

Crafting a new story of relationality requires a reimagination of education. Lange turns to etymology, the Latin roots of education including: *educere*—a remembering and bringing knowledge into consciousness, and *educare*—*how* information “shapes a person into a cultural form” (p. 323). There is much similarity of these meanings to Indigenous approaches³. In the final chapter, The Great Turning is described, a turning into both light and darkness. There is darkness as cultures come to an end. There is mass amnesia as “people no longer remember what has been lost” (p. 327). There is also a turning towards the light as education and our futures are reimagined. Transformative environmental educators must understand the roots of Western thinking in order to create life-giving communities, a “journey as a human species to the much longer journey of the Earth and the cosmos” (p. 337). Decolonization and truth telling are essential as is an orientation

1 See Simard, S. (2022). *Finding the mother tree: Discovering the wisdom of the forest*. Penguin Books.

2 For an alternative economic framework see Fioramonti, L. (2017). *Wellbeing economy: Success in a world without growth*. Pan Macmillan South Africa.

3 See Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Press.

towards the pluriverse, the inclusion of multiple ways of knowing. This occurs when we engage with an alive cosmology, dive into our deep history, befriend earth-honouring spiritualities, and balance the feminine and masculine. There is a turn towards sacred geography—seeing the universe in its unbroken wholeness. Kinship ethics, that is, the understanding that we are in relationship with and are responsible for all other beings, *is* the way forward.

Elizabeth Lange's substantive text is a major contribution to the field of sustainability education and to ecological and social justice theorizing and activism. This book serves these fields as a reference text providing a deep and wide exploration for how the planet has arrived as this turning point. It's thoroughness and detailed account can be challenging. Readers will need time and commitment to fully appreciate Lange's arguments. In other words, this text it is not a quick read, but then again, those seeking to understand and take action in relation to our current ecological crisis, will be well served to engage with Lange's critical exploration of the ideological layers underpinning extractive and exploitative economics.

Shauna Butterwick, Professor Emeritus
University of British Columbia