Teachers
Our students need us to help them create the best possible future

Let’s be climate change heroes
Preparring today’s children for a climate changed world
allowing a loving relationship with mother earth to flourish, primary teachers have the best job, don’t we?

if we’re to make the rapid changes and transformation needed to ensure that the future is safe and sustainable, the world is going to need all the intelligence it can muster right now. what is intelligence but the ability to see, hear, smell, taste, construct, and re-arrange connections? even within howard gardner’s eight multiple intelligences, it’s all about connections.

and that is what sustainability is about, too: making sure that the connections between different elements in a system, and between smaller systems within a larger system, all contribute to—rather than detract from—a viable biosphere.

in fact, helping students learn and develop an understanding of systems—to see the innumerable connections between natural, social, personal, and economic systems—is vital. we want young people to become promoters and practitioners of sustainable, legitimizing action on climate change.

here are some student dispositions that make up a sustainability-aligned learner profile:

- deeply respects all living beings, and feels a bond with the rest of nature
- is ecologically literate, with a deep understanding that many connections are at work in local ecosystems and within the global biosphere
- possesses creative, critical and systems thinking skills oriented toward innovation and solutions to problems and issues of unsustainability
- is practised in using the principles and processes of sustainable development as a framework for discussion, planning, and decision-making
- holds an abiding commitment to fairness and environmental, social, and economic justice.

as primary teachers, we can see that our responsibility lies in the first point above. however, we also start students off on their journey toward ecologicalcreativity, creative and critical thinking, and fairness that includes self, others, and the rest of nature. nature connecting is the best way for primary teachers to teach the foundations of climate change.

“No tragedies before fourth grade.” david sobel

even though many young children today face challenges that no child should have to face, they still deserve a childhood. after all, the climate change emergency is our problem; it belongs to us adults. so while today’s children are going to be impacted—if they are not already—by the changing climate, anyone younger than 9 or 10 years old has not yet developed the sense of agency to do anything about it. but there is still a lot that we can do.

observe the weather

teachers of pre-k and primary students have a different sort of responsibility when it comes to climate change. our task is to help young children observe and learn about the weather, which we do already, especially with a view to recording it over time in order to see the seasonal patterns.

so when we have calendar time in the morning and we talk about the day’s weather, we are teaching climate change. we are helping our students learn to observe trends in the weather over time, which is the definition of climate.

- concrete concepts: sun, clouds, rain
- abstract concepts: weather, trends, climate
- comparisons: hotter, colder, windier
- matching: clothing appropriate for different seasons and types of weather.

learn how to grow food

another privilege of preschool and primary teachers is the opportunity to garden with our students. consider window sill gardens, classroom gardens, school yard gardens, or a plot in a nearby community garden. due to the negative impacts of climate disruption on agriculture and food security, today’s youngsters need to learn to grow food. the impact is even greater if we can combine weather observation with gardening.

any time we spend composting, building soil, collecting rainwater, attracting pollinators, or growing fruits and vegetables with our class, we are helping to prepare them for a climate-changed world. not knowing how to garden is not an obstacle; we learn along with our students! we can take a course in food growing or permaculture design.

permaculture is an innovative and exciting landscape and food-growing design science that is based on regenerative principles and the patterns found in nature.

- elementary school permaculture lesson plans: teachbcdbctf.ca/class=permaculture&6=16ps=25.
- o.u.r. ecovillage, near duncan, hosts permaculture courses and a course on teaching permaculture to children. see: www.ourecovillage.org/courses-events.

take a walk

if you take walks—or better yet, regular walkabouts—with your class, you are already their climate change hero. that’s because you are giving them the most important gift in the world: a sense of connection to mother earth. research shows that helping our students bond with the rest of nature is vital if we are to graduate students who care about and care for the environment. “the rest of nature” teaches that we’re part of nature, too, and the capital n gives nature the respect it deserves.

even if you never leave the schoolyard, you are helping your students observe changes and differences in their natural surroundings over time. and you are helping them get to know their neighbours of all species. nowadays, this is called place-based learning. when you take children outdoors in a reverential way and with an inquiring mind, nature becomes their teacher. you get to stand back and do some observing yourself. consider booking the bctf workshop, exploring place-based learning, for your school or district: bctf.ca/PD/WorkshopDetail.aspx?id=43517.

play with the energy of the sun, wind, and water

solar toys, pinwheels, and watercourses help children discover the thermal and light energy in sunshine, the kinetic energy in wind, and the potential energy in moving water. support children in exploring which way water flows in the schoolyard or neighbourhood. give them the opportunity to play with solar toys and do photosynthesis experiments with plants. make pinwheels, then add a load, making the wind do some work. let’s expose our students early—and playfully—to the ways that renewable energy can help society achieve zero carbon emissions by replacing greenhouse gas-producing fossil fuel energy.

use the earth charter as a guide

the earth charter was developed over a decade with input from people around the world. it is recognized as a global consensus statement on the meaning of sustainability and the principles by which sustainable development can be achieved. children’s versions and teacher resources are available at www.earthcharter.org.

just knowing the earth charter’s four main headings as we teach our young students will inspire and support our courage and compassion as climate change heroes:

1. respect and care for the community of life
2. ecological integrity
3. social and economic justice
4. democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

additional resources

a list of climate change heroes resources for primary classrooms and additional resources for teaching climate change in the classroom are posted on the bctf environmental justice action group posters page at bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=27811&libID=27801.

—david sobel, professor of environmental education, antioch university new england