

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and how one school library ensured that they were a focus for its users

By Victoria Roberts

Snapshot

Victoria Roberts, a teacher librarian working in the early years, details her work to include the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in a range of areas within her practice to extend her students' knowledge and understanding.

In 2015 World leaders came together and made an historic promise to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, thriving planet when they adopted and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are a call for action by all countries – poor, rich and middle-income – to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognise that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection.

The United Nations Sustainability Goals are seen here:



At the end of 2021, while our lives were still dominated by the COVID pandemic, and while I had time at home, I researched the Sustainable Development Goals as a way of putting together a book club or wide reading list for my young students to explore during 2022.

The Sustainable Development Goal for Education has as one of its subgoals, Target 4.7. This has become an aim for me with the students I teach.

By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

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I am extremely fortunate to teach in a large independent co-educational school that has students from preschool to Year 12. The school has three well-resourced libraries with qualified teacher librarians whose role includes resourcing students, teachers and parents and allows for library displays, wide-reading contracts, newsletters, reading for pleasure and assistance with curriculum support. The school also has staff with various roles including educating for well-being; sustainability; social justice; and multicultural perspectives so a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals would be a useful and practical resource for the staff.

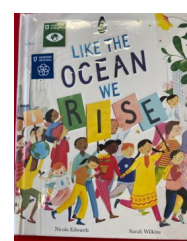
My Plan

The United Nations had proposed the idea of a Sustainable Development Goals Book Club and I thought that I could build on that idea to create something for the students, parents and teachers. I had read about how other schools and teachers had used picture books to promote discussion about the goals.

I am the teacher librarian in the Early Childhood library which caters for the Preschool, Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2 students, their teachers and their parents. There are 16 classes who visit the library weekly to borrow books. The teachers all have a bulk loan of books for use in their classrooms and parents may borrow up to ten books at a time for home reading and to supplement their child's borrowing.

As my students are young, all under eight years old, my plan required the involvement of adults – teachers and/or parents. The school already implement 'sustainability' as a perspective when planning units of inquiry and had employed a specific Sustainability Manager to undertake sustainability initiatives across the school. The Preschool also has a dedicated sustainability teacher who focuses on the environment, recycling, bees, worm farms, gardening and healthy eating.

I am also very lucky to work in a long-established and very well-stocked library, so before planning the Book Club aspect of this project, I thoroughly searched our catalogue looking for suitable books to link with each of the goals. I then affixed a sticker of the applicable goal to each identified book. (See image) I made the stickers by photocopying whole sheets of each goal icon.



It soon became obvious that I had lots of books for some goals and not so many for others and that a book might 'fit' more than one goal. I then researched which books I might add to extend some of the goals and I identified books to purchase.

Next step: I made a [Pinterest page of the book titles](#) for each of the goals.

Once the books were identified, I included them as lists in the library catalogue so that I could easily print book lists for interested parties.

If you are planning a Book Club approach, there are many ways to do that. It could be students read a book a week, a book a fortnight or as the UN SDG Book Club suggests one a month. They could read independently, with an adult or in a group. You could use the books with a Literature Circle or an enrichment group.

At the beginning of Term 2 2022, when many of my students had already finished the Premier's Reading Challenge, but were still eager to keep reading from a specified list, I put together a booklet that would serve as a reading record. I called the challenge 'Let's read and discuss 17 great books! '. I suggested the students read one book each week, either by themselves or with a parent.

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I offered teachers the opportunity to share a book a week with their class, via their teacher library bags. I use these to send two books to our classes each week. This is my way of sharing new books, books the staff may not have seen, poetry books, or books that might satisfy a specific interest of theirs. Some teachers took me up on the offer of UNSG books so each week I added one suitable for their class. The feedback from these teachers made me feel that the effort had been very worthwhile.

For the students, who were reading independently or with a parent, I displayed books from each goal for two weeks on a specific shelf in the library. They chose from those books. After two weeks I added books from the next goal, so that at any stage there were books from 2 goals on the shelf. In hindsight, this was a slow process and some of my young children lost interest, or chose inappropriately and some of the parents were keen to move through the goals more quickly.

What I did notice though, is that books were selected from this shelf by students, teachers and parents who weren't actually completing the booklet. I saw that as a bonus and it justified my adding the stickers to their covers.

I didn't want the recording in the booklet to be onerous, so all they needed to do was write the title of the book they had read next to each icon. There was a line there where they could comment about how the book made them feel, what interested them etc. I asked the students to

bring me their booklet after two or three books and I had a chat with them about their reading and what they might do with their new knowledge.

Once we got to the UN goals that focus on the environment, rather than the issues of poverty, hunger and education, the students were far more engaged. The sustainability teacher in the preschool was constantly borrowing stickered books. The students were talking about clean water, recycling, pollution in rivers and the sea and energy from the wind and sun. In hindsight with my young audience, perhaps UNSG 6 to 15 should have been the focus and I could have left the others for the older grades and their teachers.

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I used what I had written in my blog to make a booklet for parents about each goal. I regularly send a newsletter to parents.

For example, for



Goal 15 Protect, and restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reduce land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

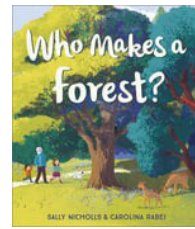
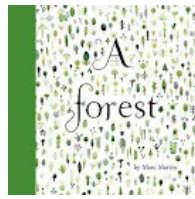
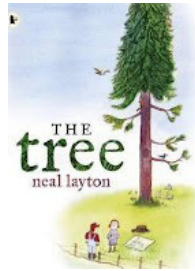
Nature is critical to our survival: nature provides us with our oxygen, regulates our weather patterns, pollinates our crops, produces our food, feed and fibre. But it is under increasing stress. Human activity has altered almost 75 per cent of the earth's surface, squeezing wildlife and nature into an ever-smaller corner of the planet.

The goal as stated above has so many aspects and is far too much to take in all at once for me, let alone a child under eight, so be very selective and break it into subheadings, such as deforestation, loss of habitat, extinction, and farming, all of which young children do know about or understand the meaning of.



[Here is a list of books to select from.](#)

The library has these three books which would make a good start for a discussion about forests and trees and the role they play in our environment.



The Tree by Neal Layton looks at what will happen when a tree is cut down and it provides for debate about whether it was a good act or bad.

Follow this up with a more factual book, either more specifically about deforestation such as Marc Martin's *Forest* or reforestation such as Sally Nicholls and Caroline Rabe's book *Who Makes a Forest?*

Discussion starters:

- We read:
- How can we make sure we look after our land?
- This book made me think that we should...

A Kindergarten child asked me yesterday why her book had a green 13 on it? I was so happy to tell her what it meant!

If you refer to [my blog](#) you will see how the blog entry was modified for the handout. You could easily do that for the other goals, if you want a quick summary and some ideas.

Life in my library and the staff I am working with has now changed since I originally did this and as a school we have undergone changes in the curriculum, the school structure and teaching priorities which means that the Sustainability Goals are not at the forefront at the moment, but I do still add the stickers to new books and use the SDGs as subject headings on the catalogue. I also use them to create displays in the library.

We constantly change the displays in our library. We encourage the students to borrow from the displays. On 27th February it was International Polar Bear Day and as polar bears are popular with young children; we did a display of books in the library. You can see that many of these books have a sticker on them for SDG 13 Climate Change. The students in my library are so used to stickers on books. If the book wins an award, or is on the UK Empathy Lab reading lists, or is on the Inclusive Books for Children lists, it will have a sticker on it. These are noticed by parents and students. A Kindergarten child asked me yesterday why her book had a green 13 on it? I was so happy to tell her what it meant! Then she went off looking for more.



Next term we will have a large display about building, construction and energy so SDG 7 Affordable Clean Energy, SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure and SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities will feature prominently.



I hope you find this idea helpful for planning some reading with your students and if you are a teacher librarian like me, you find some new titles that you consider adding to your library.

To conclude, the author Katherine Paterson said: 'It is not enough to simply teach children to read: we have to give them something worth reading' this sums up my feelings about the books and my choices.

Victoria Roberts is the Teacher Librarian for a school library that services the students, teachers, and parents of the Preschool to Year 2 section of a large coeducational, independent school in Sydney. She has a strong background in teaching teachers and students about children's literature, literacy, and English. She is an advocate of whole school Reading for Pleasure programs and school libraries as well-being havens and Third Places.