

## Review of the book *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, by Dara McAnulty

Victoria Thomson  
University of East London

*Diary of a Young Naturalist* chronicles a year in the life of Dara McAnulty, an autistic teenager and environmental activist from Northern Ireland. The book's illustration of how the climate crisis is impacting young people's mental health is increasingly relevant to our profession as our understanding of the psychological impact of the climate crisis on young people and the role of the Educational Psychologist is developing. For example, two years after the publication of *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, Dan O'Hare (2022) published the first paper for Educational Psychologists working in the United Kingdom on the implications of the climate crisis and the role of Educational Psychology.

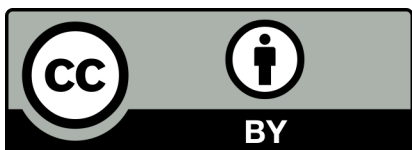
McAnulty begins, "This diary chronicles the turning of my world, from spring to winter, at home, in the wild, in my head." (p. 17). This quote illustrates the connection between the environment and mental health that is explored throughout, whether that be the negative impact of the climate crisis or the therapeutic impact of connecting with nature. McAnulty criticises the labelling of autistic people's interests as "obsessions", preferring the word "passion" to describe his interest in nature and, throughout the diary, McAnulty encourages the reader to question such stereotypes and labelling of autistic people. McAnulty's critique of labelling reflects broader Educational Psychologist values of the non-pathologisation of identity, and reflections on the language used to describe autistic people speaks to recent conversations around language and neurodiversity (e.g. Morgan, 2023). The diary records how a passion for nature began a journey of environmental activism, including actions like setting up a school eco-group and meeting with the Prime Minister's special advisor on the environment. During the year, McAnulty also moves house and school, and we gain insight on negative school experiences such as bullying and sensory overload. The diary ends with McAnulty's connection with nature and commitment to activism.

The memoir provides insights into the lived experience of how the climate crisis impacts young people's mental health. Recent research within Educational Psychology has explored what helps young people's eco-anxiety in schools (Togneri, 2022) and *Diary of a Young Naturalist* provides a rich account of the beneficial psychological impact from participating in eco-groups and protests. As Educational Psychologists, we are advocates for children's rights and

O'Hare (2022) highlights the relevance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in the context of the climate crisis, particularly Article 12 (the right to express views) and Article 15 (the right to join groups and organisations).

McAnulty often views adults inviting young people to participate and hearing their voices as a "hat-tip" (p. 208). This suggestion of tokenistic participation evokes a familiar image to Educational Psychologists of Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992). McAnulty's diary was written despite his teacher's expectations; "Your son will never be able to complete a comprehension, never mind string a paragraph together." (p. 19). As Educational Psychologists we know the importance of using a person-centred approach to access young people's voices. Indeed, much guidance has been created by and for adults on how to talk to young people about the climate crisis, but as Educational Psychologists we know the importance of talking with young people. Through reading this book, we also learn the importance of listening to young people. O'Hare (2022) highlights how, as a profession, we must consider both our supportive role for young people and our individual and collective role to reduce our carbon footprint. McAnulty illustrates the importance of adults acting in line with their beliefs to avoid cognitive dissonance, as he describes their praise of his efforts as an activist whilst taking no action themselves.

Since the publication of *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, there has been increasing discussion and research about the role of Educational Psychologists in the climate crisis. For example, many recent webinars from Educational Psychology Reach-Out have had a climate focus. I encourage Educational Psychologists to read *Diary of a Young Naturalist* alongside such literature as it provides a first-hand, rich account of how the climate crisis is impacting young people's mental health. Educational Psychologists are well-positioned and equipped to support young people with the climate crisis implications described by McAnulty: our ability to work at different levels could support therapeutic individual work as well as whole-school and community approaches; our person-centred approaches to accessing the voice of the child could ensure young people are meaningfully involved in climate-related discussions and decisions; and our role as advocates of children's rights could protect their right to express themselves about climate-related matters.



*Copyright: © 2023 by the authors.  
This article is an open access article  
distributed under the terms and  
conditions of the Creative Commons  
Attribution (CC BY) license ([https://  
creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).*

### References

- Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. UNICEF.
- McAnulty, D. (2020). *Diary of a Young Naturalist*. Little Toller.
- Morgan, B. (2023, September 25). *How language has the power to shape autistic identity in girls*. Edpsy. <https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2023/how-language-has-the-power-to-shape-autistic-identity-in-girls/>
- O'Hare, D.P. (2022). *The climate crisis, children, young people and educational psychology*. British Psychology Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology.
- Togneri, H. (2022). *From "powerless and alone" to finding "all the great people who care": a co-operative inquiry with young people exploring eco-anxiety and constructive ways of coping*. [Thesis] <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/152217/1/Thesis%20-%20Hannah%20Togneri%20-%201720282.pdf>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en>