



Digging deeper into the philosophies of nature in ECE

Educational Futures
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Scene setting

First iteration translated into German:

- In die Natur - Naturphilosophie und Naturpoetik in interkultureller Perspektive. Herausgegeben von Norman Franke und Carl Mika. Wellington: Goethe Institut, 2011
- White, E.J., & Kelly, J. (2011, in press). Digging the sustainability hole in ECE: Paradigmatic or pedagogical shifts for Aotearoa New Zealand. In Norman Franke and Carl Mika (Eds.), *Into nature: Philosophy of nature and ecopoetics in an intercultural perspective*. Wellington: Goethe Institute.

This draft ...second iteration

- a preliminary attempt at unearthing the underpinnings of current philosophy around nature based education/ ECEfS and associated pedagogies in an attempt to find ways forward.
- Paper available - appreciate feedback during and after this presentation - now and in the weeks/ months to come. Hoping to publish in PESA journal.

Ngahere Project

Action research study

Overarching research question:

- What might nature-based learning look like in diverse Aotearoa New Zealand ECE services that are committed to sustainability?
- And what are some of the pedagogical issues and provocations teachers face in this domain?

Research 'hole' metaphor

- 'Hole' – troubled status: 'Attempting to fill hole' and 'digging deeper'
- Digging should be characterised by critical engagement with philosophical underpinnings of notion of 'sustainability'

(White & Kelly, in press)

Between stories...

- Views of sustainability are enriched when philosophically excavated – locally, historically, and culturally claimed and enacted.
- Our unravelling story explores experiences of teachers against their philosophical roots, draws from historical, philosophical base and extensive body of contemporary literature

Sustainability/education for sustainability (ECEfS)

- Developing momentum in ECE
- Range of perspectives, programmes, places and pedagogies.
- Rationale: Argued need to start early with young children as their generation has to fix our mess; or the decade for sustainability; or a trickle down effect from other sectors of education.



Past, present, future: Philosophical perspectives

- 'Sustainability' traditionally located within Western philosophical debates concerning morality and freewill (Vieweg, 2011).
- Summoning Hegel, he suggests that intentions are central to activity thus locating human rights within this realm, that is our intentions towards nature will determine how we work with and respond to it. If we approach nature reflexively the physical world can be reformed.
- Views aligned to traditional and contemporary indigenous views across the world of sustainability underpinned by relationship with land.

Kaitiakitanga, stewardship or guardianship

It comes down from the mountains
and it grows from the rain
And that river has got some
taniwha in it
And that river holds wairua
And that wairua got its name from
whatever the story is
So its bringing that history back to
the present day...
And if we make that real to us, to
the teachers initially,
Then its probably easier to make it
real for our children.

[Henare – focus group transcript]



A relational view of nature

- Evident in Romanticist philosophy
- Māori (Hone Tuwhare), German (Wolfgang, Goethe, Novalis) and English poets (Wordsworth, also Psalm 96, Job 38) share romantic ideals, personify nature through engagement, giving it will and personality of its own.
- Engagement through appreciation of living qualities of nature accessed through aesthetic eye rather than Cartesian mind – a dialogic process
- Space/ place based approaches as disembodied and embodied 'geo-phenomenological' experiences in which Merleau-Pontian ideas of place/space offer both freedom and safety

Contemporary dialogic philosophy

- “A dialogic engagement with nature is concerned to acknowledge the unknowability of nature, and to celebrate with “subjunctive uncertainty” (Hardy, 2006) engagement that is characterised by surprise.
- Pedagogy in the outdoors is characterised by “polyphony, active listening, humility and playfulness” (p. 274) that demands no answers, but instead invites openness towards what can be gained through encounters with the natural world as a subject in its own right.

Moral and ethical responsibility

- Relationship where one seeks to nurture other
- Aligned to indigenous approaches
- 'Ethic of care' (Noddings, 2005)
- Notions of spirituality (Bone, Cullen & Loveridge, 2007)
- Answerability/ accountability - this dialogic encounter calls for a response
- Sustainable practice - a natural part of a loving relationship

Philosophical roots in ECE

- Froebel's garden for children;
- Dewey, Montessori, Steiner, Rousseau – importance of experiences in and with nature for learning and development
- Malaguzzi, Pestalozzi, Reggio Emilia – Environment seen as 3rd teacher

Intimate engagement with nature...

- “the child is granted the widest and deepest trove of resources with which to flesh out a self” in their engagement with nature (Plotkin, 2007, p.122)
- Essential to healthy development of personhood, physical prowess and psychological well-being
- Children missing out at risk of nature deficit disorder (Louv, 2005)
- Neurological perspective – lack of physical engagement affects tactile memory in making sense of world (Sacks, 1993)

A love affair with nature...

- Caught (experienced and acquired) rather than taught (passed from one to another)
- “Often what we see when we go out into the forest is that they stop, they slow down, they enjoy, they are calm. It’s almost spiritual”

(Lynley- focus group transcript)

Teachers noted shifts in practice when working in the outdoors describing acts such as “communing with nature”, “being at one with nature” and “valuing silence” as central learning opportunities that require less intrusive pedagogical practices



Absence of such engagement...

- Impacts on the very capacity to name , that is bestow meaning on a place as a lived experience (Hung & Stables, 2011; Wattchow & Brown , 2011)
- Salutary messages about the negative consequences of children not being exposed to/ engaging with nature.

Philosophical orientations suggest...

- We should support children to develop biophilia
- “An innate relationship with nature is primal to our being...product of human evolution in nature for thousands of years... To ignore this ancient biological relationship is to jeopardize our human survival”
- Notions of interconnectedness, embodiment and place enshrined in works of Froebel & Pestalozzi and Te Whāriki, NZ ECE curriculum.

Contemporary influences

- Economic, political and social
- Local, national and international
- Political unresponsiveness led to 'survivalism' [eventual depletion of earth's resources] and 'green radicalism' [actions can change course of nature] (Dryzek, 1997)
- Environment, economics and society - pathway to sustainable future (Littledyke, Taylor & Eames, 2009)



A paradigm for thinking
about the future

Pedagogical shifts for ECE

Pedagogical shifts

- Enviroschools - based on 'green radicalism'
- Hegel's notion of usage and ownership is evident where learner is encouraged to 'appropriate' natural world through relationship with its objects in order to preserve it. Only in complex dialectical relationship that the individual can come to appreciate their role as protectors (Vieweg, 2011)
- Children as active agents in own lives - deliberate turn away from romanticised notions of childhood

Sustainability education

- Both a constructed concept for change - 'Learning for change' (Davies, 2009), and
- embodied experience for engagement - 'the joy, the awe and the wonder' (Marion, focus group)
- Role of teacher not simply hands on or hands off, but instead an array of pedagogical possibilities that are dependent on complex interplay of environment, people and purpose.

Plotkin (2008) cautions...

- Risk in direct teaching about depletion of resources before children 'develop an experiential bond with nature in own backyards and neighbourhoods' Instead he encourages play that is characterised by exploration, imaginative and emotional engagement.
- Stance characteristic of many teachers experiences in the NZ bush – experienced in the heart and realised in thoughtful pedagogical practice that models concern for environment
(Carr & May, 1993)



Is a paradigm shift needed?

- Links to Dewey's reflective practice (roots in Platoonian society)
- Caution re such approaches to nature experience because of Cartesian tendency to emphasise mind at expense of body and culture
- Alternatively critically explore histories and belief systems that exist within place-based context which is characterised by engagement
- Reflective communities of practice (Tal & Morag, 2009)

What is the most appropriate story for us to tell? And why?

“Diverse approaches might be taken in excavating the sustainability hole from the perspective of these teachers...The answers as much as the questions are to be found only by entering the sustainability hole with teachers with children themselves at the centre of inquiry [a research focus we suggest is alarmingly absent from sustainability research to date]”

(White & Kelly, in press)

Revising our story

“Sustainability is not merely a recent phenomenon promoting practices that teach children how to care for the environment and research how this is enacted. Instead we suggest the sustainability hole holds a far more subtle encounter of engagement that draws deep into local pedagogical practices that are underpinned by historically and culturally imbued philosophical values – not merely an application of recent ECEfS trends...this revised tale will undoubtedly be imbued with messages from the past, and confronted with challenges from the future”

(White & Kelly, in press)

Cathie – focus group

- ... it can be a burden for small children to be taught that they have to care for their environment because they see modelled around them people who are not caring for it, even in their own families, so how do we allow them not to feel guilt and how do we take away that burden? I think it is taking them to natural settings, allowing them to see things that they are in awe of and that they love. They will grow to understand why it is important that we protect these things and then, in future days , they will be the engineers of that too.