Premier’s University of Wollongong Early Childhood Scholarship

How does the concept and ethos of Forest Schools relate to early childhood education in Australian contexts?

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This paper represents the culmination of a learning journey that began with my own connection to the earth and a strong desire to do all that I can to protect its living creatures and the biodiversity that supports them. These pages summarise the learning that I attained through visiting and engaging with high quality early childhood learning centres in Scotland, England and Denmark that incorporated outdoor learning as a vital component, not only for the relevance of connecting children to nature but for the many (or vital) benefits it can bring to learning and development.

I spent five weeks visiting sites where outdoor learning is either a major or is the only component of the educational setting. Some of the sites could be described as Forest Schools, an approach in which children are ‘outdoors every day, all year round as part of their preschool education’ (Williams-Siegfredson, 2012, p. 9), usually within a woods or forest. Being outdoors in natural settings for the whole day, in all weathers, with limited access to an indoor space is seen as delivering quality learning within strong pedagogical theory (Williams-Siegfredson, 2012).

I spent up to three days in five early learning centres in Scotland and England, and one day each in three centres in Viborg, Denmark. My investigation mostly consisted of observational visits and engagement in outdoor learning with children. I also participated in professional learning activities.

During my journey, I kept a blog (inurturenature.blogspot.com.au), where I shared stories. Narrative is considered an appropriate way to ‘capture and understand educational experiences’ (Leitch, 2006, p. 549). Stories can help teachers make sense of their practices (Duff & Bell, 2002) to clarify how theory and practice connect and to support critical reflection towards their alignment (Forrest, Keener, & Harkins, 2010). This report incorporates the research and theories behind my stories and reflections.

Rationale

We live in a global village, with global responsibility (Haas, 2014). ‘Developing an understanding of the importance of a sustainable future is vital in helping children to become global citizens …’ (Bradbery, 2013). The Australian Curriculum requires students to demonstrate global awareness that entails gaining knowledge about sustaining our social and natural environments and a key component of The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) includes social responsibility through care for the environment (ACARA, 2012).

The National Quality Framework (NQF) requires educators to embed sustainability and care for the environment into their everyday practices (ACECQA, 2011). This study acknowledges the shift in mindsets around outdoor play provision that is reflected in these documents and frameworks and holds hope for a future where educators are enriched with knowledge and skills. ‘Teachers need to have the skills and confidence to take groups outdoors … .and continuous professional development is fundamentally important …’ (Higgins, 2010, p. 12).

According to Higgins (2012) schools have a central role in achieving this, and we need to empower educators to develop effective and innovative ways to connect children to nature within Australian contexts. In seeing children as connected and contributing world citizens educators promote learning about sustainability, connectedness to land, use of resources and the results of human impact (Australian Government Department of Education, 2009).

These complex understandings are one of the quality areas that services are less likely to achieve when undergoing assessment and rating through the NQF (ACECQA, 2014). According to P. E. Bailie (Bailie, 2012), children’s informal experiences in the natural world and connection to nature have been decreasing over the past 20 to 30 years as a result of living in the modern world, posing a risk to the development of future conservationists. Louv (2008) describes this as ‘the extinction of experience’. Being in contact with nature facilitates children’s learning about the environment as well as bringing about improved development (Munoz, 2010), and yet Australian children are spending significantly less time outdoors than their parents did (Bowden, 2011).

Beginnings

In one of my earliest memories, at age four or five, I had come across a dead magpie, lying on its belly, its lifeless eyes open to the elements and to me. I sat with the creature, patting its perfect black and white feathers, and sobbed my heart out.

What was it about my early childhood experiences that gave me such an affinity with animals and with the environments that support their existence? I didn’t attend preschool. I had a childhood of outdoor play in an expansive backyard, with gardens and trees to climb, providing me with sustenance such as mulberries, figs and loquets. My childhood was ‘free range’, one of danger and risks. Bumps and scrapes were an everyday event. We only returned indoors for food, or comfort if something went wrong, and reluctantly at the end of the day as the street lights came on.

Could my extensive experience in the freedom of the outdoors, the opportunities to understand the ebb and flow of weather, the activities of birds and insects, the hurts of splinters, thorns and bindies contributed to my affinity with nature? According to Louv (2008) such experiences are what develops a bond with the natural world and forms the foundations for environmental stewardship.

In a world where green time is being replaced with screen time, how do children connect to their natural environment? And what are the benefits of connecting, not only to the earth, but to the individual child? During the study tour a number of themes came into focus as I increasingly understood how the ethos and practices of outdoor learning equate to many benefits for children.

Leadership

At every setting, I encountered strong leadership which successfully enabled change, bringing a shared vision of rich outdoor experiences to fruition. This leadership affected staff, parents and children. I saw leadership shared, with joint collaborations and support for rich learning. A culture of mutual respect and cohesiveness is promoted when leaders communicate their own sense of vulnerability, self-doubt, and a willingness to learn alongside their staff members.

In preference to a ‘fix it’ mentality, effective leaders enter into a process of inquiry with their teams (Van Stralen, 2002). This was demonstrated in the unified approaches to learning and educating that I observed. The head teacher of Boldon Outdoor Nursery shared with me a jointly constructed journal produced as she led her team through the process of change. The team asked many hard questions and reflected deeply so that there were more questions than answers. There was high respect for the process within a clear vision for the outcome. This process, often muddied with turbulence, doubts and questioning, ultimately led to an extraordinary outcome.

A Commitment to Lifelong Dispositions for Learning

Achieving ‘school readiness’ has often meant formalising early education and preparing children for academic learning, school structures, rules and conformity (Docket, 2006). In the settings I visited, children were seen as capable and motivated learners who processed a ‘vast array of learning experiences and expectations which may or may not reflect the knowledge, skills and understandings found in the school environment’ (Docket, 2006, p. 18).

Formalised, adult directed and highly structured learning has been found to produce primarily negative effects in cognition, motivation and social climate (Stipek, 1998) and is of limited benefit in supporting the academic and social success of children in the early years of school (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

In contrast, outdoor learning has been found to highly motivate and engage children (Scott, 2014). When this occurs with the added benefit of long periods of uninterrupted time, the child enters what is known as the ‘flow zone’, that space where time ceases to exist and learning is optimized (Willaims-Seigfredsen, 2011).

Parents I interviewed expressed a desire that their children be confident, articulate, resilient and persistent. Surely these characteristics should hold as much, if not more, value in early education than a skills-based approach to school readiness. In an Australian study on ‘bush kinders’ benefits for children included increased confidence, motivation and concentration; developmental growth; deeper conceptual understandings and respect for the natural environment (Elliott & Campus, n.d).

Risk Benefit

As a society, we have become so risk-averse that children are often prevented from making judgments and assessing their own capacities and abilities (Louv, 2008). At Auchlone Nature Kindergarten, I walked along a fallen tree with a two year old. We began at about a meter off the ground, but we would have been at almost three meters before she took my hand and said, ‘Too big’. She was capable of assessing the risk and I trusted her instincts. Every site presented the potential dangers of tree climbing, bush walking, scampering over rocks, swinging on ropes and scaling to the tops of splintery stumps. There were brambles, stinging nettles, uneven ground and tree roots to trip on. In the absence of plastic toys, sticks, rocks, leaves, branches and soil were used in a wide variety of ways in open-ended play. I saw educators trusting children to make their own risk assessments. Risk was viewed as a benefit rather than something that needed to be managed.

According to Little and Wyver (2008) children benefit from risk-taking, as it builds confidence, promotes active play and actually facilitates children’s safety. Without appropriate risk-taking children’s decision-making skills and the sound judgments that protect them from serious harm remain underdeveloped. ‘The best safety lies in learning how to deal with risk rather than avoiding it …’ (Warden, 2007, p. 108).

Autonomy

An engaging and exciting outdoor space that is filled with natural elements gives children an opportunity for long periods of uninterrupted play and autonomy. At Cowgate Under Fives forest site educators followed the children’s lead for the whole day. The educator gave the children time, listening to the group and helping the children to listen to each other. As Teresa, the outdoors practitioner, commented:

‘Our children live within a fast paced capital city. Many are “sky dwellers”. Stickland is our children’s opportunity to connect with our self, our own bodies, the earth, nature and each other. We are guided by the rumble of my tummy, “it’s time for lunch”; the energy we feel within our bodies “it must be time for our next adventure, I can feel my heart pumping.” ’

What I observed and participated in at Stickland was responsive and intuitive, the whole day guided by the children. I watched a small child lay himself close to the ground and methodically construct a sand bridge with a hole he could look through. It took about an hour. He was in the flow zone. Time was of no consequence and the educators honoured that.

According to Taylor (2006), children in contact with green space experience greater autonomy and decision making. At the Secret Garden in Fife, Scotland, children were outdoors in the woods for the entire day. I was encouraged to engage in mindful teaching, where interactions were kept to a minimum while the children played. This was a challenge for me as I see the benefit of engaging children in sustained shared conversations and actively connecting children’s play activities to their learning (Sylva et al., 2003). Given the resources of a natural setting and a purposeful lack of adult guidance (or interference) I was reminded of children’s capacity to construct their own learning for hours on end. I observed them investigating, exploring possibilities, role playing, socializing and contributing to group outcomes. There were multitudes of possibilities for children to try out their ideas, test their hypotheses, and come to conclusions together (Australian Government Department of Education, 2009). Outdoor spaces are ideal for this because they are ‘endlessly rich in play potential’ (Haas & Ashman, 2014. p. 22).

I often observed individual children for long periods seemingly doing nothing. Their bodies were completely relaxed, and their faces showed that they were focused on nothing in particular as they stared into the landscape or into the space they inhabited. They were just ‘being’ and the long moments of time in the woods and forests gave them this freedom.

Outdoor Learning Equals Real Learning

With extended periods of play outdoors, children’s senses are ignited, their affinity with active learning is activated, their curiosity and exploratory natures are set free and problem solving becomes a natural response to difficulties that need to be overcome.

At Wingate Children’s Centre and Training Base I engaged with a small group of children collecting snails, worms and beetles in the rain to divide into a feast for the two chickens. Mathematical understandings incorporating the use of meta-language as an authentic response to a real life need combined to extend children’s understandings of number concepts within a framework of rich language and cooperation.

The EYLF gives early years teachers a foundation on which to build their curriculum. It includes principles and practices that call for a responsiveness to children, building on strengths and acknowledging capacities. These are also fundamental to the philosophy behind the teaching in a nature kinder (Warden, 2010). All areas of the curriculum are met through children’s interaction with the natural world, supported through intentional teaching and open-ended and authentic experiences as well as integrating academics through holistic approaches (Bailie, 2012). The experiential nature of the learning leads to enquiry-based pedagogies that ‘ignite the imagination, engage the senses, create social bonds and inspire a sense of awe’ (Haas & Ashman, 2014. p 22).

The EYLF includes five broad outcomes that educators work towards with children that I believe can be realised through outdoor learning. One stands out in particular. Outcome 2 states that ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’. In becoming socially responsible and showing respect for their natural environment children investigate, explore, solve problems collaboratively and develop knowledge. Scientific approaches increase understanding of the interdependence between land, people, plants and animals and promote a growing appreciation and care for natural and constructed environments. In exploring relationships with other living and non-living things, observing and responding to change, children are supported to ‘… develop an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments and the interdependence of living things …’ (Australian Government Department of Education, 2009).

If outdoor learning is real learning for all children, it can be considered even more so for Aboriginal children. The ‘eight ways of learning’ that form a guide for teachers of Aboriginal children of all ages comprises aspects that are compatible with the idea of nature learning.

The ways of Aboriginal knowing, doing, being, valuing and learning retain a strong ancestral basis that has been greatly disrupted in the making of our modern society (Yunkaporta, 2010). These ways include connection to land and to community. Non-verbal and active learning that incorporates doing over being told and the use of story are important components. Learning includes non-linear processes and involves opportunities to dismantle knowledge and put it back together along various pathways described as learning maps, and the use of symbols throughout learning journeys support children in learning that is in tune with their lands and their culture.

These eight ways of learning can very naturally be incorporated into a nature preschool, particularly in respect to connecting children to the land and to place, which is strengthened through community identity. Regular classrooms have often been found to disconnect Aboriginal children from learning (Yunkaporta, 2010). When ancient ways are acknowledged and honoured, when educators use Aboriginal pedagogy in their learning environments, a respectful atmosphere of acknowledgement is created and participation is increased (Andrachuk, 2014).

Conclusion

In gaining a sense of *belonging* to the natural world and opportunities to *be* at peace within it, our children are more likely to *become* custodians of our fragile planet. What I experienced throughout my study tour answered my concerns and challenged me to engage in deeper thinking about the concept of Forest Schools in an effort to promote it within Australian contexts.

As early childhood settings endeavour to provide ever increasing quality, a focus on issues of sustainability is now seen as integral, even to the extent of embedding them into every day practices. In addition to this, the evidence around the benefits of connecting children to nature and its usefulness in education and health benefits are a call to action. I hope to enhance the body of knowledge, promote the possibilities and advocate not only for children but for trees, animals and wild spaces everywhere, along with every child’s right to be a part of our natural environment.

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