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Nature by Default in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability

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Abstract   This essay critiques the relevance of historical antecedents about children's play in nature and how these historical and political mechanisms create cultural rovoked by Taylor's (2013) exploration of the pervasive influence of romanticised images of innocent children in nature and our own experiences of never-ending 'nice' stories about young children in nature, here we trouble how nature experiences may or may not preclude children's meaningful and agentic participation in sustainability. We question is engagement with nature, a tangible and easily accessible approach in early childhood education (ECE) promoting a 'nature by default paradigm' and potentially thwarting a fuller transformative engagement with sustainability. Thus, we argue the case for shifting our frames beyond idealised romanticised notions and human–nature dualisms to a 'common worlds' (Haraway, 2008; Latour, 2004; Taylor, 2013) frame guided by collectivist understandings within connective life worlds. Such a shift requires a significant recasting of ethical human–nature understandings and relationships in ECE.

Questions and Historical Antecedents

We question: 'Are evocative images of children playing in nature and the dominance of nature experiences in early childhood curriculum enough to promote a sustainable future?' These critical reflections are drawn from our combined research and field experiences in early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) over more than 30 years, where we have become challenged by this default mode of 'doing sustainability' (Young

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& Elliott, 2014). We suggest that early childhood educators often perceive experiences both in and about nature as sufficient to address the pressing challenges of sustainability (Elliott, 2012; Elliott & Davis, 2009). The potential benefits of children's play experiences in nature are strongly advocated (Chawla & Derr, 2012; Kellert, 2012; Munoz, 2009; Planet Ark, 2011; Townsend & Weerasuriya, 2010) and we do not refute these; however, we see benefits in revealing the deeper motivations for the prevalence of the 'nature aesthetic' as we grapple with the complexities of human–nature relationships in the 21st century. We also question whether engagement with nature is a tangible and easily accessible approach in early childhood education (ECE), promoting a 'nature by default paradigm' and potentially thwarting a fuller transformative engagement with sustainability. Default values and mechanisms can be articulated through the well-known practices employed in computer programming to make a device user friendly, whereby a common setting is typically assigned. Default thinking is automatic and simplified, and when faced with new problems, ideas or challenges, there is tendency to leverage solutions from the past. Are we simply drawing on past antecedents to rationalise play in nature without the necessary deeper diagnosis and critical reflection that is required to both envision and enact sustainable futures?

Taylor (2013) provokes insights and understandings of human–nature relationships and the 'nature by default paradigm' in ECE. She purports that the historical antecedents about play in and with nature, drawn from theorists including Froebel and Rousseau, have created pervasive romanticised images of children and nature as integral to ECE. These antecedents, along with positivist nature study stances, perpetuate nature–human dualisms such as culture/nature, male/female and human/animal, and are entwined with enlightenment ideals from the past that support early childhood educators' implementation of nature-play based programs. Rousseau's linking of childhood with nature was 'commonly characterized, alongside some of natures other key collateral terms such as women and native peoples, as lacking rationality, full capacity and sophistication' (Taylor, 2013, p. 10). Somewhat later, Froebel first coined the kindergarten as both a garden *of* children and a garden *for* children; and, extending the metaphor further, children were viewed as the plants to be tended and nurtured by educators. Inspired by both Pestalozzi and Rousseau, Froebel designed gardens and play objects called 'gifts', signifying the links to the aesthetic of nature, science and beauty that is prevalent in past and current early childhood pedagogy related to the later teachings and practices of Montessori, Dewey, Steiner, and others. The pedagogical ideas of the present are bound together in ECE with the past antecedents we have outlined; and fears for the future regarding children's disconnection from nature are articulated, and nature-play is adopted as a 'Band-Aid' to heal this separation. Early childhood educators return to these habituated framings when they attempt to integrate sustainable education only through nature experiences, without thinking through entrenched practices such as time spent in naturalised playspaces, child-centred sensorial experiences with natural materials, and teacher-directed science learning about plants and animals. For to think outside the dominant frame, outside of the human stance, is a true challenge of our times. Drawing on these historical antecedents, a 'nature by default' paradigm now dominates ECE; and here we argue that without critical questioning about human–nature relationships in ECE, we will fail to fully address issues of sustainability.

Current Contexts

The call by Taylor (2013) to reconfigure our understandings of relationships with nature in ECE and move beyond these historical antecedents is, in part, a response to play in

nature recently coming to the fore in ECE. Internationally, impetus for this trend has come from Louv (2005) and his coining of the term 'nature deficit disorder'. This term is not a medical diagnosis but a catch-all phrase to encapsulate what might be lost through human alienation from nature; he identifies children with 'diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses' (Louv, 2005, p. 34). However, nature itself is often portrayed as a healer where young children are concerned: 'the cure for the lifestyle maladies of contemporary childhood seems glaringly obvious and simple: outdoor play in nature' (Moore & Marcus, 2008, p. 160). In her critical examination of Louv's diagnosis, Dickinson (2013, p. 2) suggests that to 'describe the symptoms without examining the underlying pathology' will not comprehensively address the issue of sustainability. Further, she states 'while Louv and educators have noble intentions, their cultural assumptions can obscure core issues and inadvertently promote messages of weak sustainability' (Dickinson, 2013, p. 2). Converging with Louv's work has been the rapid emergence of forest preschool programs internationally and in Australia (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Knight, 2013); and such emergence has been well supported by media interest in publishing evocative images of children in nature. Also, specifically in the Australian context, early childhood educators are responding to recent directives; namely, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS; Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2013), which require natural elements in outdoor playspaces and support of children's stewardship of the environment. However, the former document is more about rhetoric than children's active agency with sustainability initiatives and principles (Davis & Arlemalm-Hagser, 2014), while the latter document tends to contextualise sustainability as being outdoors in nature within Quality Area 3: The Physical Environment (ACECQA, 2013, pp. 99–102).

These early childhood contextual features are also influenced by Sobel's (1996, p. 10) oft-quoted sentiment that is steeped in developmental ideals 'that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds'. Yet, in contrast, the emerging body of ECEfS research adopts ethical and social justice perspectives that identify children as empowered decision-makers, action-takers and problem-solvers for sustainability (Davis, 2014; Davis & Elliott, 2014). Also, Hagglund and Johansson (2014) make a case for engaging with value conflicts as integral to emerging curriculum in ECEfS, and Arlemalm-Hagser (2013) advocates for critical discussion beyond sentiments of stewardship in ECE. Young (2015) describes entering a space of 'pedagogical schizophrenia', where the push and pull of feeling negative and acting hopeful creates a dichotomy between environmental degradation and the 'romantic, dominant discourse of children and environmental education that rarely sees or tells the whole story' (p. 18). Hence, we argue one cannot expect the complexities of human–nature relationships and their implications for global sustainability to be addressed simply by humanist notions of stewardship and children playing in nature. Jensen (2002, as cited in Lassoe & Krasny, 2013, p. 17) adds that 'participation as encounters with nature has a restricted scope in that it tends to exclude participation in deliberative dialogues to explore causes of environmental problems, create visions, and learn by acting for change'. A fuller transformative engagement with sustainability requires deeper understandings of the pathology here and 'deliberative dialogues' about the underpinning discourses of dualisms.

The theorising of ecofeminists has deepened understandings about the intersection of oppressions implicit in Plumwood's (1993) articulation of the logic of domination, where the world is divided into linked hierarchical dualisms. These dualisms become

strengthened by the 'nature by default' mode because children learn that they are separated from nature. This separation takes place in ECE through the colonising practices of control, mastery, romanticism, ownership, destruction, and silence that 'depicts nature as a tool in a human project' (Antal & Drews, 2014, p. 10), rather than a multi-relational exchange of belonging with nature. Plumwood (2003) has previously described the prevailing human–nature dualism in Western cultures as a key causative factor in the current global ecological crisis. She argues that a humanist dualism 'results from a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated other. This relationship of denied dependency determines a certain kind of logical structure, in which the denial and the relation of domination/subordination shape the identity of both' (p. 41). From our experiences in ECE, we suggest that nature is the subordinated and objectified other, a resource for play, a classroom aesthetic colonised from local, global and unknown sources such as shells and seed pods, perhaps a place to be; but, notions of interconnectedness or an 'ethic of partnership' (as cited by Merchant in Antal and Drews, 2014, p. 10) are not commonly canvassed in deliberative dialogues with children. We believe there is certainly scope for these dialogues, particularly aligned with the principle of intentional teaching (DEEWR, 2009) and the pedagogy of 'purposefully framed play' (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013, p. 12). However, such approaches rely on educators' own depth of environmental understandings and pedagogical repertoire in order to fully explore an ethic of partnership with nature through a sustainability lens.

Hedeflak, Almqvist, and Ostman (2014, p. 12) have specifically highlighted in their literature review the need for 'research into children's learning processes' around sustainability, and we would extend this with a need to untangle and enmesh the power dynamics of the pervasive humanist dualisms in Western cultures as these detract from fuller transformative engagement with sustainability. As Taylor (2013) identifies, this is not an easy quick fix and requires time for (re)consideration as 'the authority of romantic nature is so powerful that it makes questioning feel counter-intuitive, irreverent and indeed, "un-natural"' (p. 114).

Moving Beyond Historical Antecedents and Dualisms: Common Worlds and Revisioning Ethical Relating

Common worlds as a conceptual frame promotes a reimagining of the pervasive hierarchies of human/nature dualism; it is about bringing together and re-entangling humans and nature within nature cultures that acknowledge the multiplicities of living, to not only blur the boundaries that categorise nature and culture, but to see, relate and act differently. Haraway (2008) refers to this as becoming 'worldly' as we grapple with new ways of relating, acting and being. This conceptual re-entangling draws on responsive relationships and collective sensibilities and interactions. Taylor (2013) asserts 'common worlds pedagogies would endeavour to circumvent children-as-subjects learning about nature-as-object … common worlds emphasise their entangled relations within this world, following the principle of learning with or becoming worldly with the others in the collective' (p. 123). From this frame there is potential for early childhood educators to engage with children and nature in innovative and challenging ways that move beyond nature as the object of play. Relational engagement with sustainability is the intent here with children and adults immersed together in entangled relations of similarity and difference with human and non-human others that prompt educators to think and act differently. Where ways of thinking, acting and relating (Kemmis, 2009) with a stick, ant, dog, mountain, human and water are troubled to reveal what it means to live ethically and what it means to sustain life in times of dire environmental uncertainties.

What happens if we ask different questions, such as: What do human–human relationships have in common with human–nature relationships? Animal narratives and encounters can be conducive to 'thinking-with' this relational environmental approach. For example, a large tree close to an early childhood setting was home to a family of magpies, and at certain times of the year the educators placed signs to alert people entering the building to watch out for swooping magpies. Parents often arrived after a swooping incident, appearing agitated as they exclaimed, 'Can't you do something about them'? The birds could be destroyed, the tree cut down, more signs posted, and all of these strategies would drive a wedge between us and them — them as the pest and us as the controllers of the problem. These are the everyday multispecies encounters where children learn about the separation of human and non-human animals. How would this separation be challenged if educators decided to try to understand and explain why magpies swooped and then integrated this relational ontology with children's questioning and thinking? The children could write and illustrate a picture book that explained how magpies protected their babies, just like human parents protect their babies and young children. This example presents opportunities to move beyond just watching and listening to birds, or, as eloquently expressed by Tsing (2005), that we 'turn to the beasts and flowers, not just as symbols and resources, but as co-residents and collaborators' (p. 172). This relational collaborative frame integrates environmental justice, kinship and co-habitation, empathy, habitat destruction, ecological sustainability, social justice, and intersectionality. The potential for children in this relational pedagogy is to realign humans as part of nature, and something changes when this is explicit. It is not a story of us and them, but the reimagining of 'we'.

Taylor's (2013, p. 117) advocacy for children's 'relational and collective dispositions' aligns with Davis's (2014) revisioning of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989). In this revisioning, Davis (2014) outlines four additional rights dimensions, not just the current individual human rights. She proposes that human rights, viewed through a global sustainability lens, also include agentic participation rights, collective rights, intergenerational rights, and bio/ecocentric rights. In the current global context, focusing our thinking only from an individual human rights perspective potentially thwarts attempts for species to live equitably and sustainably and impedes a common worlds view of entangled relations between humans and nature. Shifting from the individual human to the collective more-than-human notably includes the stick, ant, dog, mountain, human and water, and these have the potential to become expanded sites of sustainability knowledge. For example, a stick that was once relegated as an object for children's play is now imagined as a dog toy, a home for ants or part of a mountain ecosystem propelled through waterways. The stick is enlivened through and with nature and not just as a byproduct of trees, because the stick becomes constituted in and by the collective relationality.

Concluding Thoughts

Australian early childhood educators, supported by current policies and frameworks, are readily embracing the identified need for children to be outside and actively engaged with nature. We acknowledge this has enormous benefits for children's health, wellbeing and experiential learning about natural elements. Also, we do not see the entrenched sensorial pedagogies in ECE, including touching, smelling and seeing stones, water and trees as under threat; but the origins and motivations need to be questioned to understand and articulate why these sensorial pedagogies are so valued and frequently enacted. This is our intent here as we critically reflect upon humanist practices and open up to new ways of thinking and being; note that we, too, are being

challenged. We ask that educators also critically reflect about the origins and rationale for the various iterations of play in nature and how it aligns with a broader global view of sustainability, to identify the human–nature dualisms at work in Western cultures, and to think of new ways to be entangled *with* and *of* nature rather than just in it. A nature by default approach alone, informed by historical antecedents in ECE, has not effected significant change towards a sustainable future to date and offers weak examples of sustainability. It only skims the surface, and we believe it does not bode well for a sustainable future. The status quo, including the silencing of the collective dimensions of sustainability and the unitary separated human self, are to be urgently addressed if sustainable education in ECE is to progress in a hopeful manner, rather than remain in an era of nostalgia for 'nature'.

Keywords: nature-play, early childhood education, sustainability, common worlds, relationality

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