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‘I’m learning nature now with them’’: what can a holistic perspective contribute to our understanding of the influential relations between young children, adults and a natural environment?

Overview

There is a current concern about children’s loss of contact with the natural world and its associated health benefits. Risks to children’s safety through urbanization have shaped their increasing dependence on adults in accessing outdoor play across many global contexts. This research has explored a gap in current literature through considering impacts on adults in shared outdoor experiences with children. Froebelian pedagogy has been foregrounded within this through considering mutual benefits in child, adult, and environment relations. The contemporary role of a suburban preschool has been explored through its organisation of family trips to natural environments over a year. Access for all families has been facilitated by the connective function of early years practice through community relations. Ten participant families with children between 2–4-year-olds became the focus of research activity. A sensory ethnography approach framed use of child-worn Go-Pro video cameras during trips, and this footage formed the basis for reflective interviews with parents (Pink, 2009, 2015). Data was analysed using a vocabulary of holistic relations that gave equal value to child and adult-led ways of knowing (Gebser, 1949, Chawla, 2002). Findings highlighted the potential for children to draw adults into multi-sensory experiences, ‘big questions,’ and storied relations with surroundings whilst adults could draw children into abstract relations that could take in a whole global context. It is the equal valuing of these relations that is distinctively holistic and can be considered as the rich connective potential between individual and whole. There is current interest in five pathways to nature connection described as senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion (Lumber et al, 2017) and this research highlights the potential for such experiences to be promoted by and with children. Froebel's

pedagogy may now offer guidelines in shaping an education for sustainability through appreciation that current good practice has holistic logic at its historical roots. The research offers an illumination of the call to “live with our children” and “obtain from them what we all need” (Froebel, 1898, p. 88). This might be considered as the potential for ordinary surroundings to appear extraordinary once more with children, and for this to fuel our reverence for them and a capacity to care (Bennett, 2002).

Key Findings

1. The significance of ‘whole context’ in early education.

The study contributes to considering the role played by the ‘wider context’ in early education. Practice oriented to building connections within the local community and environment can support child development through contributing to the strength in surrounding relations. Research demonstrating the multiple benefits of nature contact can demonstrate the value in such experiences for children, and the contribution of human communities to surrounding life is a key theme of Froebel’s holistic education.

2. The significance of ‘whole practice’ in early education.

The study contributes to considering the role played by all aspects of early years practice in supporting a child’s sense of place within a whole global context. This includes opportunities for direct contact with the life forms and processes of natural environments along with the multiple meaning-making activities we engage in culturally together. Young children demonstrate that embodied and emplaced experience is important for their learning but also the potential to ask questions and imaginatively explore ideas. This makes the learning resources, activities, songs, stories, and rhymes shared through early education as important as environments in supporting a child’s sense of their life in and with nature. Activities such as family trips to local natural environments can support connections and relations beyond an early years

setting. Through this, a sense of the continuity between child, family, community, nature, culture, and society. This can frame a broadened consideration of the role of 'enabling environments' and 'positive relations' within early years practice in supporting the learning and development of the unique child.

3. The significance of the 'whole individual' in early education.

Froebel's holistic philosophy offers a unique contribution to educational practice through promoting consideration of the mutual benefit in child and adult experiences. The research highlights how children can draw adults into re-experiencing immediate surroundings in immersive and creative ways whilst adults can draw children towards an appreciation of its place within a whole global context. Each can support the other in an ongoing lifelong learning process in seeking to promote a healthy balance in relations between self and surroundings. This holistic perspective can shift focus on current conditions and highlight opportunities within them for a collective development. Such a view aligns with current sustainability thinking and a need to act local but think global and live into the enactment of "responsive and responsible relations" with our environment (Davis & Elliot, 2014).

Next Steps

1. Early educational practice:

I am currently working in collaboration on the development of a Froebelian inspired early years pedagogical response to the climate crisis. This will offer an educational model supportive to human and environmental health through an attendance to their relational reciprocity.

2. The child as expert:

There is scope to consider what is offered by exploring child, adult, and environment relations across diverse global contexts. Froebelian philosophy

offers a framework to explore influence from local environments and cultures but also what might unite across them. I am currently working on a consultation project exploring the potential to address research gaps into young child, adult, and natural environment relations across diverse global contexts. The project is exploring the scope offered by ethnographic research for building a global picture reflective of the rich particularities of local places. This project seeks to promote sustainability thinking through understanding our need to act as “apprentices to our local environment” as it is through these conditions that we learn how we make our place and equally, how our place makes us (Abram, 1996). The child’s perspective is an important voice to promote for its wider benefit for sustainable development. Working on this consultation project is highlighting the potential for emerging synergies between research and practice and the importance of being reflexive and adaptable in addressing collective needs.

3. Sensory ethnography:

This study has made a unique contribution to knowledge through use of sensory ethnography in exploring a holistic perspective. I hope to contribute to the continued development of ‘doing sensory ethnography’ (Pink, 2009) through the above-mentioned project. This is by giving voice to children’s embodied ways of knowing and promoting the importance of child-led relations for holistic development. Sensory ethnography is a research method of contemporary significance through its attendance to qualities of attention and use of digital media that enable an engagement with our full capacities for knowing in inclusive ways.

4. I am currently contributing to three book publications exploring the contribution of Froebel’s holistic pedagogy to sustainability education and have an article in print.

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