

Journey to Reconceptualization of Children in Nature: Going Beyond the Fences

Michelle McMichael

Ministry of Education, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Forest school and nature-based pedagogy have grown in popularity in recent years. Previously, I examined the perspectives of parents who chose to enrol their children within these programs to learn and understand why. As I furthered my studies, I became concerned about how these forest and nature schools connect to Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning, as many claim. I wanted to examine how Forest school pedagogy and Indigenous perspectives of education may connect or not, and how these land-based pedagogies intertwine with Indigenous perspectives of land as first teacher. This work is a storying of my educational journey about land-based pedagogy, environmental education for children and how children are viewed within nature. The aim of this story is to ask what might happen when Forest pedagogies, Indigenous peoples, and their epistemologies and ontologies are assembled? The secondary purpose is to ignite pedagogical conversations amongst educators and inform about Forest School programs and how they connect to Indigenous perspectives or do not connect at all.

Keywords: Forest School, Common Worlds, early childhood, indigenous, nature, nature/culture

My story begins with me finding myself as a student after working in early childhood education for nearly 20 years. I returned to school to complete a Bachelor of Early Childhood Leadership the year before I turned 40. In my teaching and practice, I viewed outdoor education as spending time on the playground with the children within my program. Then I was asked to read *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2008) for my child development class, and it began to open my mind and eyes to what might happen if we take children beyond the fences.

I have chosen to tell this story of my reconceptualization of children in nature because I am currently living it. Cajete 2000, states, "Storytelling is a very important aspect of Native America. It is not just the words and the listening but the actual living of the story (p. xii). Storytelling is a powerful way to teach and inform, and as I explored Indigenous perspectives throughout my research, sharing it as a story seemed fitting. I must begin by situating myself. I am not Indigenous, which may be a limitation. I am a white Early Childhood Educator of settler-colonial ancestry. I am relying solely on the educational perspective of the Indigenous scholars I have been reading with to explore these perspectives more deeply.

I am in the process of coming to know Indigenous science as, up until now, I have viewed the world with a Western lens. "Native science is born with a lived and storied participation with the natural landscape. To gain a sense of Native science, one must participate with the natural world" (Cajete, 2000, p. 2). Westernized culture is what is familiar; however, this coming to know process is allowing me to begin viewing the world through a different lens, the lens that has been shown to me through my reading and research of Indigenous scholars and their perspectives.

Native traditions have been viewed and expressed largely through the lens of Western thought, language, and perception. The Western lens reflects all other cultural traditions through filters of

the modern view of the world. Yet, in order to understand Native cultures, one must be able to see through their lenses and hear their stories in their voice and through their experience (Cajete, 2000, p. 4).

After reading with Richard Louv and exploring his ideas and theories as an undergraduate student, I knew that I wanted to explore outdoor education, specifically Forest Schools, in more depth and gain a sense of the perspectives of parents who choose these programs. As a graduate student I continued this journey to learn and think more critically about the world and land-based pedagogy and practice. I began learning more about Indigenous ways of knowing and decolonization. Forest Schools and their pedagogy intrigue me. My wonderings grew to include how these forest and nature schools connect to Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning or perhaps do not connect at all. I am asking you, the reader, to take this journey with me as I story where my perspectives regarding outdoor education began, where they are now and where they are headed. I acknowledge that the land on which I am taking this journey is the land traditionally cared for by the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Neutral Peoples. I acknowledge the enduring presence and deep traditional knowledge and philosophies of the Indigenous People with whom I share this land today. I also acknowledge my western settler perspective and that I am continuing to decolonize this perspective and my practice as I explore this topic further. I aim to take this journey with an open mind and heart and to listen with all my senses as I seek to deeply investigate Forest School pedagogy and the voices of Indigenous scholars I am reading with. I will share their viewpoints, on which I recognize I am not an expert, nor do I have the authority to speak to them. I invite you to travel this path with me with openness as together we come to know.

“Coming to know” (Cajete 2000) is a way of describing distinct Indigenous views on the process of learning via more intuitively connected pathways. Indigenous ways of coming to know respect the individual’s relationship with and the responsibility for what is being learned and explore stories and other diverse approaches to the subject at hand, learning pathways that appeal to diverse learning styles in non-prescriptive ways. Coming to know ultimately invites us to explore our emergent learning process as part of our own journey, rather than challenging us to enter into externally imposed, isolated theme areas. (Anderson et al. 2017, p. 59).

Truth and Reconciliation

I feel it is imperative to include a short but fundamental section about The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015). This report outlines 94 Calls to Action for non-Indigenous governments, institutions, and individuals to strive toward reconciliation. Education is mentioned repeatedly throughout the information within the Calls to Action, which has moved educational systems to include Indigenous content and teaching methods in their curriculums. Something that stood out to me as I engaged with my learning and the Calls to Action is that residential schools still existed as recently as 1997, when finally, the last federally funded residential school, Kivalliq Hall in Rankin Inlet, closed. I graduated high school this same year, and yet I do not recall hearing much about this triumphant event; however, I am uncertain if I genuinely did not hear this in the news or if it did not impact me in the same way it does today because I was ignorant to such things. Perhaps due to my westernized upbringing or my westernized education, which failed to include such topics within the curriculum. I am immensely proud that my children have been exposed to education which provides history of Indigenous peoples and residential schools. I am also proud of my work in learning the truth and educating myself. I have participated in taking Indigenous education programs offered by the University of Alberta and the University of Toronto. Non-Indigenous citizens have a responsibility “to learn the truth and to actively work toward reconciliation and the decolonization, at the very least, of our thinking and of our educational institutions” (Johnston, 2020, p. 230).

A Journey to Coming to Know

The concept of “coming to know” is a term used to describe the process of developing understanding in Indigenous Science. Coming to know reflects the idea that understanding is a “journey, a process, a quest for knowledge and understanding” with all our relations (Cajete, 2000, p. 66) and there are responsibilities attached to the application and sharing of this deep understanding. The journey to understand the reality of existence and harmony with nature

is acquired by quietening the mind, listening deeply, and achieving a give and take of human and more-than-human consciousness.

“Coming to know” has required me to personally reflect upon and conceptualize the balance between my own Western worldviews and the views presented in Indigenous epistemologies. As we take this journey together, I am asking you to step carefully and with an openness to reflection. The process of reconceptualization of children and nature has come with challenges for me. The challenge of letting go of what I have learned and having an openness to re-learn comes with feelings of discomfort, and a need to become comfortable with the uncomfortable.

I have become comfortable with the acceptance of how influenced I and the field of Early Childhood Education are by Rousseau’s theory of ‘negative education’ and the assumptions I began this journey with. I believed land-based pedagogy and environmental education were universal but have come to know that it is not. It is culturally specific and can be different for different people based on their cultural views and values. I have had to admit to my views of children in nature and nature itself being romanticized. Finally, I have reflected upon questions and wonderings such as whether land-based pedagogy and environmental education are about stewardship or if this is part of the problem and do forest and nature programs incorporate an Indigenous perspective, or do they only provide only an illusion of indigeneity?

This journey is a quest for knowledge and understanding. As I take this quest with you, together we will explore romanticized notions of children in nature, dig deeper into common worlds conceptual framework, investigate the theory of new materialism, and perhaps come to know a reimagined view of children in nature and forest pedagogies.

The Literature

There are several bodies of literature I am drawing on, and as I have been reading, I have pictured a dinner party where I invite the guests and engage in lively and rich dialogue. On one side of the table are the romantics who have greatly influenced my perspective regarding nature and children. On the other side of the table are the scholars whose work has challenged and shifted my thinking away from these romanticized notions of children and nature and who share a common worlds conceptual framework. At each end of the table, I have placed Indigenous scholars who will share their perspectives regarding Indigenous science and decolonizing education. Together we will tackle how we might articulate the relationship between childhood and nature beyond the nature/culture divide.

The Romantics

Affica Taylor (2013) explores rethinking human place and agency and what it means to be human. Taylor suggests that although well-meaning, stewardship pedagogies are outdated as they do not allow humans to rethink their place and agency within the world. It places humans as primary agents of change and environmental stewards. They can lead to the idea that humans can improve upon nature and can exploit the earth’s resources. This thinking comes from the modern western epistemological nature-culture divide. Let’s take a closer look at the romantics and how they have influenced early childhood education, perceptions of children and nature and each other.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been given the title of ‘father of early childhood education’ due to the dominant impact his work and ideas have had on how children and childhood is viewed. During the eighteenth century, Rousseau’s viewpoints changed parenting practices. He contended that children were inherently innocent. He believed that all humans were born pure and innocent and should be protected from the adverse effects of society and civilization. Rousseau’s work *Emile, or Treatise on Education* (1762), was central to the change in parenting practices and how childhood was understood. He argued that children are innocent until they are corrupted through experience with the world. He believed his method of raising children would maintain innocence by having children develop naturally in nature and following their natural instincts, resulting in well-adjusted adults who will also be good citizens.

I find the impact Rousseau’s theory has had on early childhood education mildly amusing as Rousseau himself lacked the credentials necessary to be seen as an expert regarding raising children or education. He was not a practising

educator, nor was he successful as a parent. In fact, he surrendered his own children as infants into what was referred to at the time as a foundling home; a place for children who had been abandoned by their parents and were being cared for by others, similar to what we might refer to as an orphanage. Yet, despite his lack of first-hand experience, Rousseau's famous fictionalized philosophical treatise about the ideal natural education of a boy in the countryside gained sufficient credibility and traction to become immensely influential on childhood and education.

This feels like a good time to stop, sip some wine, and offer you the reader a chance to reflect. How is it that Rousseau's theories of education have had such a profound influence on early childhood practices when he was not even an educator himself; he was just a man with an intense distaste for societal influences...

Rousseau held nature in high regard and passionately argued his aversions to European society, which are powerful psychological forces behind his thinking. His romanticized notions played into the division between nature and culture.

Rousseau's figurations of Nature as a perfect child and a perfect teacher were not only shored up by the nature/culture divide but were the products of his emotional investment in reproducing the binary logic of good nature as opposed to evil culture (Taylor, 2013, p. 9).

Rousseau sought to purify and rescue childhood by implementing ideas of Nature's child and Nature as teacher to carry out this work. "These figures allowed him to rescue childhood from the degenerative 'hands of man' and return it to Nature (Taylor, 2013, p. 11). Rousseau inspired two of the most renowned romantic writers with his theory. As a result of this influence, William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau would connect childhood with nature and often refer to nature as a mother and teacher in many nature-worshipping works of poetry. The land is essential to Indigenous peoples as they can view the patterns and cycles of animals, plant life, seasons, and cosmic movements. Just as the romantics refer to 'mother nature,' the Indigenous peoples see all that the land provides and that "All of this happens on the Earth; hence, the sacredness of the Earth in the Native American mind. The Earth is so sacred that it is referred to as "Mother," the source of life" (Cajete, 2000, p. xi).

My Heart Leaps Up

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.
William Wordsworth (1802)*

Wordsworth's writing projected romanticized beliefs connecting nature and childhood. In his poem *My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold* (1802), Wordsworth writes about what appears to be the beauty of a rainbow. However, an in-depth analysis reveals a deeper meaning. The poet suggests that people should maintain their sense of childlike wonder into adulthood and old age. In this poem, Wordsworth is writing of his feelings of joy and happiness when he is reminded of his childhood by a rainbow in the sky. He worried about the loss of childhood and a direct connection to nature as people grow into adulthood; he believed that people could only truly see nature's beauty during childhood.

Henry David Thoreau was part of the North American Transcendentalist movement, an intellectual and literary movement concentrated in the New England region where he lived. They followed suit with Rousseau's value of nature; the Transcendentalists supported the vital goodness of nature and opposed the risks that urban industrial society posed to it.

Driving ahead Rousseau's visualization of figure of Nature as Teacher, Thoreau spoke about what he learnt from nature in his book *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854). By returning himself to nature, Thoreau sought to find vital truths about 'man' in nature that he felt were missing within society and cultural practices. Thoreau argues that a person who lacks being moved by the beauty of things is one who does not understand reality because they do not possess a proper awareness of the world or a connection to it. Like the other Romantics, he closely associated childhood with nature, and like Rousseau and Wordsworth before him, he bemoaned the lack of time that children spend in nature and advocated a return to nature as the remedy for this untimely 'weaning' (Taylor, 2013, p. 14).

Nature

O Nature! I do not aspire
To be the highest in thy quire,—
To be a meteor in the sky,
Or comet that may range on high;
Only a zephyr that may blow
Among the reeds by the river low;
Give me thy most privy place
Where to run my airy race.
In some withdrawn, unpublic mead
Let me sigh upon a reed,
Or in the woods, with leafy din,
Whisper the still evening in:
Some still work give me to do,—
Only—be it near to you!
For I'd rather be thy child
And pupil, in the forest wild,
Than be the king of men elsewhere,
And most sovereign slave of care:
To have one moment of thy dawn,
Than share the city's year forlorn.
Henry Thoreau (1895)

It is important for me to break a moment and share that reading *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2008) is a crucial part of my story. It is where my story began. This book directly fed into my understandings of childhood and nature which I see as these understandings have grown and changed; they were romanticized. My thinking about nature and children has been challenged and changed since my initial reading of this book. I do feel Louv has some valid arguments, as do all the romantics; however, I also see how Rousseau's theories still impact environmentalists and early childhood education today and directly contribute to nature/culture divide.

In *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2008) the central message is that society is losing its sense of interaction with nature, especially today's children. He argues that children do not play outdoors in today's world. As a result, they lack social interactions, a loss of imagination in play, and less time being active overall, which can lead to obesity, literacy problems and mental illnesses. Louv's target audience is parents, educators, and communities. He aims to create awareness amongst the targeted audience of the consequences of losing our connection to nature. He also presents concerns about the advancement of technology and how it has changed the way children play and see the world, as well as how educators teach.

I will pass the salad to Louv now and offer that I agree technology has fundamentally changed the way I and other educators teach. It has become commonplace to walk into an early years classroom and find an educator using an iPad to play music, or to record children's learning in some way. In my experience, I have found that some educators get so caught up in photographing children's learning that they often miss out on the aspect of co-learning alongside the child. It is almost like when you go to a concert or show, and you see everyone in the crowd holding up their phones to record the performance while viewing it through the small screen. Imagine how different the performance

would be if we put the phone down and really listened with our whole selves to the music. How much richer would the experience be?

The theory of Nature Deficit-Disorder is introduced by Louv and he contends that the barriers society faces contribute to a decrease in the amount of time children spend outdoors in nature. Louv claims society has become so technologically driven that it is losing its connection to the natural world. He offers solutions as to how parents, educators and communities can promote a healthier, greener future which he feels will bring new hope to mending the fragmented bond between children and nature. I must pause and acknowledge that Louv's claim regarding technology may have some truth. I recall being 10 years old and excitedly receiving my first video gaming system of the time. I remember leaving behind my running shoes, and my bike becoming quite dusty from lack of use as I spent days trying to master level one of the game. I became so enthralled that I even dreamt about the game at night. It became all I could think about.

Louv's arguments have been accepted wholeheartedly by those involved in nature education and offer a modern-day twist on Rousseau's *Nature's Child* and *Nature as Teacher*. Louv offers romantic notions of nature and scientific theories to create a movement to return children to nature. These arguments and theories have given new life to Rousseau's thesis of negative education. "Rousseau was the first to famously declare the innocence of natural childhood to be threatened by 'man' and his books, and this has become a recurring historical theme, usually linked to the advent of each new communication technology" (Taylor, 2013, p. 51).

As I top up everyone's wine, I would like to invite the Indigenous scholars who are joining us for this dinner to share some of their perspectives thus far, regarding returning children to nature.

Global warming, pollution, rapid urbanization, destruction of forests, unsustainable growth, and consumption on the part of the overdeveloped world are all cause for concern that environmental degeneration will become normalized, resulting in children not having access to nature and facing the possibility of never having nature experiences or developing the ability to respond appropriately to environmental degeneration and crisis. Adopting Indigenous perspectives and incorporating these into ecological education is essential to include rather than just returning children to nature as suggested by the romantics. Teaching children to appreciate the land and view it in a different way will allow them to establish a harmonious relationship with nature; "to understand it, to see it as the source of one's life and livelihood, and the source of one's essential spiritual being" (Cajete, 2000, p. 179). Indigenous people viewed the land and place where they lived as being in a perfect state.

But in the minds of many Europeans...The people indigenous to this land were never truly understood for who they were and are: a people who, in a variety of ways and with all their heart and being, tried to establish a direct relationship with nature, which they understood as the essence of the Great Mystery that guides and breathes life into all things (Cajete, 2000, p. 180).

Embracing Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching children about appreciating the land could help children to see the land as "full of spirit, full of life energy [and learn to] live with their environment in a holistic way" (Cajete, 2000, p. 180).

When my interest surrounding Forest Schools first began, I had the opportunity to speak with parents of children who chose to enroll their children to gain insight into their reasoning why. Many spoke of their distaste for mainstream education practices and their preference for their children to be taught outside within nature and from nature. Many shared with me that they felt their child could learn everything they needed within a nature-based program. I found myself entirely on board with what I was learning throughout this research project and began to advocate for children to be educated in and from nature; however, Taylor (2013) makes a good point when she states:

Those that advocate for children to be educated directly in and from nature, as opposed to about nature, position themselves as counter voices to mainstream schooling. In fact, their arguments for returning children to nature, like Rousseau's treatise three centuries earlier, are defined by

their opposition to the status quo and their appeal to a Romantically-inverted valuing of the nature/culture divide (p. 46).

Once again, I was faced with accepting the immense influence Rousseau has had not only on me but also on parents and the field of early childhood education, as well as how his theories contribute to nature/culture divide. The romantic belief that children have an innocent and unique relationship with nature has been passed on from Rousseau and reiterated by many.

This romantic belief continues to be shared by Nature Education advocates who “all passionately advocate (like Rousseau) that the best kind of learning comes from children’s direct, rather than mediated, nature experiences, and (yet again like Rousseau) they all bemoan the loss of these experiences” (Taylor, 2013, p. 50).

Everyone at the table has listened to the romantics share their images and views of the nature of childhood and their concerns for the fate of children due to societal influences. I think the romantics heavily invested in providing symbols of childhood because they believed childhood to be a natural state. Under this romantic gaze childhood, like nature became a place of purity and innocence. Childhood represented for the romantics, what they hoped for the human condition. Growing up meant growing away from the evils of man if they could maintain a closeness to nature. As we prepare for the second course of this meal, I will turn the conversation away from the romantic notions of nature/culture divide and move towards common worlds conceptual framework.

Common Worlds Conceptual Framework

“Common worlds is a conceptual framework developed to reconceptualize inclusion in early childhood communities. Common worlds take account of children’s relations with all the others in their worlds — including the more-than-human others” (Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p. 108).

This idea of common worlding has changed and shifted my thinking about how children relate to nature and the world. Common World’s framework could be seen as a decolonizing response that disrupts romanticized and decontextualized correlations between children and nature as part of outdoor pedagogies. It repositions the child from the centre of the pedagogy and allows for the more-than-human aspects of the world to have a sense of agency.

Nxumalo (2019) rethinks children in nature and challenges forest and nature school pedagogies to move away from viewing nature as a return to innocence for children. Nxumalo draws upon the perspectives of Indigenous thinkers and Black feminists and offers a coherent critique of anthropocentrism in contemporary Western education models. She points out that the dominant discourse in environmental education for children, particularly in forest schools, often encompasses colonialist and modernist binaries between humans and nature. This occurs “through positioning nature as something (certain) innocent children need to be returned to” (Nxumalo, 2019, p. 1). When Nxumalo refers to ‘certain’ children, she refers to the exclusions that seem to be normalized. She explores the potential of decolonizing practice through the disruption of the Westernized normalization of these exclusions that “occur when predominately white middle- and upper- class children participate in North American nature or Forest schools and become positioned as future earth saviours and stewards” (Nxumalo, 2019, p. 1).

I will pass the potatoes to Nxumalo along with an acknowledgement that looking into who has access to these Forest and nature school programs should be taken into consideration. The programs can be expensive and do not always allow for subsidized payment of fees. This means that these programs which claim to include Indigenous perspectives are not accessible for many Indigenous children who could benefit from them. These programs could offer significant benefits to Indigenous children by providing culturally relevant education, promoting opportunities for inter-generational knowledge transfer, and creating safe spaces for healing and learning. I do think non-Indigenous children should also have access to these programs because changing the relationship that many non-Indigenous people have with the land, has the potential to lead to a healthier Earth for all.

What can we do? What can I do? These are questions that have continuously come to mind as I have embarked on this journey. Then I read *Unsettling the Colonial Places and Spaces of Early Childhood Education* (Pacini-Ketchabaw

& Taylor, 2015). In chapter 4 Emily Ashton examines assumptions of a social pedagogical approach and how curriculum strengthens dominant settler discourse by silencing Indigenous voices. In this chapter, Ashton recounts a story about how during her master's degree, a visiting professor gave a talk about the perpetual colonization of Indigenous education.

Following his talk, a fellow class member asked, "What can we do"? The professor stood and spoke back, "I am not here to tell you how to fix the mess you've had a part in causing." Deafening silence ensued. The presentation abruptly reached its end. At the time, I was shocked, but years later – after hearing that same question posed again and again to the same people – I understand differently. This is not a claim to empathize in a walk-in-your-shoes kind of way but an indication that I have become more attuned to the expectations underlying such questions: That those who endure the violence of settler colonialism also somehow bear the burden of resolving it for those who most profited from it. (Ashton in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 83).

This story significantly impacted me and brought me back to my question, what can I do?. I realized that although I wanted to build connections with Indigenous communities to help me to decolonize and change my practice, it is not the responsibility of these communities to tell me how.

Ashton analyzes the inclusion of an Indigenous colleague, Bear Nicholas, to help review the curriculum within the Early Childhood Centre at the University of New Brunswick as a form of "enclosure" and containment—a nod to multiculturalism, including Indigenous pedagogies and principles within their already established Eurocentric framework. She notes that Bear Nicholas "refused to let her work be commensurated into a "honey-do list for white people" (Tuck, 2007, p. 154) ...and instead used the forum to speak to issues of perpetual settler colonialism" (Ashton in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 85).

The common worlds framework prompts us to remain open to human differences and to extend beyond them. Common worlds is an inclusive notion that resists the division between human society as separate from nature and other more-than-human living things and embodies post-enlightenment western thinking. It allows us to have an alternative way of thinking about the world and the kinds of relations that compose our experiences within it.

Instead of rehearsing the nature/culture binary, or the 'Great Divide' as Latour (2005) calls it and seeing ourselves as living in exclusively human societies – somehow separated from the 'natural' world because of our exceptional human qualities – the notion of common worlds encourages us to move towards an active understanding of and curiosity about the unfolding and entangled worlds we share with a host of human and more-than-human others (Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p. 111).

Reading with these scholars is when my journey took an abrupt turn away from the romanticized ideals of children and nature I was grasping so tightly and made me begin to move to a place of 'natureculture'. In this place 'natureculture' is so tightly interwoven that it cannot be separated into nature and culture. 'Natureculture' is the inseparable and messy entanglement of humans and everything else. It is time for the next course of this dinner-dessert- and everyone has their own slice of the pie.

New Materialism

As I continued to think with Common Worlds framework, I began to explore the pedagogy of new materialism. "New materialism calls for a reconceptualization of play (Holmes and Jones, 2014; Lenz Taguchi, 2014), in which places, children and objects intra-act with each other. When children play with place, place and objects 'play back'" (Procter & Hackett, 2017, p. 22).

I was interested in children's relationships with the land and materials (the more-than-human) and how they interact with each other. I began to explore placing less agency on the child and the development of skills and focusing on the more-than-human materials having a participatory role and what they were teaching the child.

To demonstrate this for the educators I worked with, I provided each person with a piece of clay and asked them to play with it in their hands as we talked. We discussed where the clay came from and that it was a gift from the earth. I asked the educators to share what they would document if they were observing a child playing with clay. They immediately began to focus on the skills (fine motor and hand-eye coordination). I then asked them to think about what the clay is teaching the child. They paused for a few moments, and then new ideas began to emerge. Clay teaches them about tactile and visual feedback as they explore how it feels, smells, sounds and changes. It illustrates that it has limitations; it can be hard and tough to work with and then become soft and easy, and it lets the child know that their actions have consequences. The clay is teaching them that it can be invigorating yet soothing and that it is not perfect. The children learn a sense of calm, curiosity, imagination, and accomplishment. As they began to switch their thinking to allow the clay to have agency, the clay started to reveal the many things it could teach.

“Horton and Kraftl (2006: 73) have described material objects as 'acting back,' and Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) have suggested that sand plays with children just as much as children play with sand” (Hackett, 2017, p. 3). This decentering of the human gives the more-than-human a participatory role and opportunity to teach the child about what it can do in the world.

This exercise I engaged my educators in is only the beginning of understanding and igniting a conversation about transforming how we as educators might begin to look at materials in a way that they can act back. Still, after this brief encounter, I began to see the pedagogical documentation they were producing take on a new narrative that included the materials being given a participatory role in the learning giving it more meaning and authenticity.

I connect this thinking to land-based pedagogy. By listening deeply, we can begin to understand and see what the land is teaching us. As part of my previous research, I had the opportunity to visit forest school programs within the area I live. During my observation at one program, the children at the end of their class were invited to participate in what they called a 'sit spot.' A sit spot is a time to sit in nature and listen with all your senses. As the children engaged in this, I noticed they were all silent, which is unusual for three- and four-year-olds. After a few minutes, the children were invited to share what they noticed during their sit spot. One child shared that they felt the wind on their skin and that it showed them that it could be gentle but strong. Another child spoke about the light rain they felt and how the earth needed it to grow. One child said they heard a squirrel rustling in the woods and that they must be collecting nuts to feed their babies. As I listened to these children, it became clear that if we open our minds and allow ourselves to listen, the land around us can teach us many things.

This land has a voice, the sea around the land has a voice, and the resources within have a voice. The voice comes from the people who live off of the land and sea; the people whose ancestors fought to ensure that the future generations would have a place to call home, as well as the resources they would need for survival. (Pokiak, 2013 via Rowan, in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 198).

I would like to take a moment to share with you a photograph of my favourite 'sit spot'.



(Sit Spot at Laurel Creek, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada)

After observing the children participating in their sit spots, I was inspired to give this activity of connecting and listening to land a try. This is a spot I visit often. I sit quietly and listen with my whole self. Sometimes I will journal what I see, hear, feel, taste and occasionally I will draw. When I draw, I sometimes sketch what I call a sound map. I put myself in the middle and then add drawings or words of what I discover with my senses around me.

Rowan (2015) speaks about developing pedagogies to enable children to acquire voices informed by the land, water, ice, and snow. Rowan explores how thinking with land, water, ice, and snow might offer a way to enact and live Inuit knowledge and practices in early childhood education and nurture relationships. She proposes that:

thinking through land, water, ice, and snow provides a way forward through the massive challenges of past/ongoing/future colonization and climate change. In Inuit nunangat pedagogies, the central thesis is that “things to learn [are] the lessons that come from interacting with the land” (Price, 2008, via Rowan in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 198).

Rowan shares the details of a learning story. A learning story is a story produced from individual and collective reflection to document children’s learning and plan future learning activities. She shares this story to “highlight pedagogies that think with land, water and ice” (Rowan, in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 203).

This story takes place on a winter’s day. The educator/Elder Elisapi Weetaluktuk took the children and some recently acquired wooden snow knives outside to the playground. Elisapi began to carve the snow with the wooden knife while the children watched becoming intrigued by what she was doing. The children wanted to know what she was carving. Elisapi admitted to the children that she did not know, but told them the figure would become recognizable as she continued to skillfully use the knife to shave and shape the snow. “In this encounter, however, it was not just Elisapi’s skill that produced the carving. The qualities of that particular chunk of snow also co-determined the shape of the final figure”. (Rowan in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 204-205).

The children continued to watch as a waterfowl emerged and then later a bunny. A child named Nowra then selected a toy wooden pana (snow knife) and another child named Minnie chose a wooden ulu (a woman’s knife) with which to work. Nowra looked at the snow as he considered how he would approach this task based on observing how Elisapi had completed her carving. When he completed his carving, he placed it on display for everyone to see. “Nowra had learned, first by watching and then by doing, about carving snow with a wooden pana” (Rowan in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 204-205).

Using his recent observation of the educator’s demonstration, this child learned about their relationship with the snow and the wooden carving knife.

Thinking with snow takes time and practice. The snow exerts its agency on the child within their interaction, as well as vice versa. The snow is teaching the child about its carveability – it is affording certain kinds of carvings to emerge. It is a co-production involving snow, tool, and child. This is different from the Western notion of a child learning about snow in which the objective is for the child to master the snow (Rowan in Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015, p. 205).

This story and interaction with the snow demonstrate Inuit knowledge and how learning comes from interactions with the land. It provides an example of how local place-based learning plays an intricate role in educating children despite ongoing colonialism within Western conceptualizations of education.

This brings a close to our dinner party. We enjoyed good food, wine, and conversation. I want to recognize all the perspectives brought forth and thank you the reader for opening your mind and listening deeply to each one. Have I let go of the romanticized view of nature and children in nature that I began with? No, not completely; however, Cajete (2000) defines worldview as “a set of assumptions and beliefs that form the basis of a people’s comprehension of the world” (p. 62). I can honestly say that my assumptions and beliefs have been challenged and this is changing my comprehension of the world.

Continuing Coming to Know

Forest School is an educational approach and program delivery. Forest School is not a new concept but has begun to become growingly popular in recent years within Canada. Histories of Indigenous peoples that have come to light within the last few years have contributed to outdoor education and land-based pedagogy becoming an upward concern within the early years sector. Forest School is a form of regular outdoor learning which draws on the outdoor Kindergarten practices of Denmark, Sweden, and Scandinavia. Europe, China, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada have all embraced the idea of outdoor education programs. Forest School can be referred to by many names; in Canada, two prominent names are taking hold: Forest School and Nature School.

Children attend forest school outdoor learning sessions regularly and repeatedly, either weekly or bi-weekly, for a minimum of six weeks and possibly extending throughout the school year. Children have the freedom to engage in activities such as fire lighting, nature crafts, climbing, fishing, and building with items they find in nature. Children are encouraged to learn through an emergent play-based curriculum.

Forest school is described as 'constructivist education' (O'Brien 2009) with children constructing meaning through interaction with each other and the natural environment. The outdoor learning environment is seen to provide a flexible social space with multiple opportunities for learning and interacting with others (Harris, 2017, p. 275).

An assumption I began this journey with was to think that Forest Schools, due to being situated within the forest and nature, would have much in common with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, teaching and learning. This seemed like a reasonable assumption because, on the surface, certain aspects of Forest Schools draw upon and are inspired by Indigenous education perspectives. However, I quickly learned, as I explored this theory more, I came to know that there are understandings outside the realm of both my view and the Western view. I surveyed some literature about forest schools and Indigenous perspectives of education to gauge where they meet and vary.

Newbery (2012) states, "part of the work of environmental education must be to confront the traumatic traces lingering in a nation born through colonization" (p. 30). Environmental educators emphasize the land, and in doing so, there is a need to slow down and listen to allow themselves and the students within these programs to "develop a sense of place, a respect for this more-than-human world" (Newbery, 2012, p. 30).

I wonder how many environmental educators within the growing popular forest schools truly embrace this philosophy. Newbery's (2012) Canoe Pedagogy article challenged and altered my thinking about children and nature. I look less at nature as a romanticized open space waiting to be explored while not acknowledging the erasure of the people who were removed from their land and the destruction of languages, cultures, families, and histories.

Newbery (2012) argues that outdoor education pedagogy should include the history of Indigenous peoples on the land and the history of colonialism.

I continue to wonder how many educators within outdoor education programs genuinely understand and know the history of the land on which they teach and work to include this within the curriculum.

Although Forest Schools are located within nature, they continue to be "socially and culturally constructed" (Harper 2017, p. 320) western forms of education. Newbery, 2012, says, "colonial histories and legacies always exist in the background of Canada, and the more we ignore this, the less we are able to create something better in the present" (p. 32). Newbery also suspects that a failure to acknowledge the connections between colonialism and pedagogy may be a factor that has led "to the stereotypical representation of Aboriginal peoples and the appropriation of cultural practices in some outdoor education programs" (p. 31).

In Canada, where I live, many are working diligently to build relationships with Indigenous communities and educators, and educational institutions are genuinely working towards weaving Indigenous perspectives into their programs and curriculums.

On their website, the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, 2022 states that “relationship with Land is the heart of what we do, and this Land is Indigenous Land”. They go on to acknowledge that the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada and Forest School Canada are “rooted in white settler thinking and approaches” and it is led by white settlers. They admit to having imposed a “settler colonial way of being with the Land” due to their programs not being developed with Indigenous people. They go on to speak to wanting to repair their relationship with Indigenous communities and acknowledge that it will take work to establish trusting, safe and reciprocal relationships with the Indigenous people they have harmed. “In doing that, we hope that Indigenous and Western worldviews will have equitable voice and space in our programs so that they are safe, meaningful, and culturally relevant for all participants” (Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, 2022).

This is a much different message than the message previously offered by the organization. In the past they have boasted similarities between Forest school pedagogy and Indigenous perspectives. Their new message suggests that the similarities within Forest school pedagogy were only assumptions as it was never co-created with Indigenous peoples. They have claimed that when educators use Aboriginal pedagogy in their classrooms, “it helps create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sharing, it helps Aboriginal children and their families to feel more welcome in the school” (Forest School Canada, 2014, p. 13).

I am not sure that Indigenous children would feel the same. Reading this made me wonder how true this is, considering the great amount of work that still needs to be done towards truth and reconciliation.

Leanne Simpson (2014) speaks to her experience of education as being “one of coping with someone else’s agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my well-being, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence” (p. 7).

Reading this perspective on education from an Indigenous person who experienced this throughout their educational career, increases further my hope that the changes proposed from organizations such as the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada and the development of new curriculum within western education to include Indigenous perspectives does come to fruition.

In general, the premise of Forest School pedagogy is to spend time playing outdoors; ideally, activities are child-led and involve inquiry and place-based learning. The activities can be planned or spontaneously occur from children’s curiosity, wonders, and questioning (Harper, 2017). Forest School pedagogy touches on “ecological systems theory, and approaches to human development can be taught through observing biological systems, participating in group development (Forest School Canada, 2014) and discovering nature as a reflective and restorative place” (Harper, 2017, p. 321). Mainstream education typically does not allow for this type of discovery, and experimental learning, which, as we learn more about land-based pedagogy and Indigenous educational perspectives, becomes evident why many children (as I found in my previous research) do not cope well within Western Euro-centric educational settings. Western worldviews have removed the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual connection to land from our education systems. This connection stems from Indigenous perspectives of land as first teacher. “The idea of land as first teacher considers the interconnectedness and interdependency of relationships, cultural positioning and subjectivities that extend beyond the borderlands of traditional mainstream conceptualizations of pedagogy” (Styres, 2011, p. 722).

Risk, Resilience and Environmental Stewardship

The recent movement to return children to nature suggests that children are spending less time playing within natural environments than in the past, which also means children are not reaping the many benefits of playing in nature that the literature suggests. Outdoor education is said to provide opportunities to learn about the environment and to support personal development. Spending time in nature is believed to allow children to not only experience and learn about nature but also participate in taking risks, develop resiliency from facing these risks and challenges, as well as “...develop teamworking and negotiating skills, engage in creative thinking, critically analyze situations, and develop problem-solving skills” (Harris, 2015, p. 274).

Forest schools support engaging in risky play, and it seems to be something that makes it appealing. Returning to Louv (2008) and his argument that many children do not spend enough time in nature due to fears, one fear being the risk of injury, makes the thought of children participating in controlled risky play within Forest School programs a selling point for parents as they offer the “antidote for the risk-averse society” (Johnston, 2020, p. 233). Harper (2017) defines risk as “the potential for loss or harm, yet risk can also present opportunities for gain” (p. 318). He argues that risk builds resiliency, a necessary component for child development.

Indigenous perspectives regarding what risk and resilience mean are very different from what Forest School pedagogy offers. Hansen and Antsanen (2016) share a much more complex view of the meaning behind risk and resilience for Indigenous people through a study conducted with Cree and Dene Elders from Saskatchewan. Throughout the study, the Elders spoke about learning skills such as using a knife to cut meat, hunting, harvesting and fishing by observing their grandparents and through experiential learning on their own. Experiential learning is seen as connected to “lived experience,” as in learning by doing, through observation and imitation that occurs as part of daily family and community.

These are all skills which include elements of risk but skills that were required to be learned to survive and have a good life. These risks were a natural part of their education, and in comparison, how we define risk within forest school programs is very different. Thinking about risk from an Indigenous perspective means that risky play is a socially, culturally, and colonial constructed notion.

I struggle with the word resilience. Within Forest School pedagogy, it is used positively and thought to come as a result of risky play. Still, resilience has a different and more profound meaning when thinking with Indigenous views. It means long-suffering and enduring a colonial state. Culture and language through colonization have been stolen from Indigenous peoples. They were subjected to being taken from their families and suffering unspeakable violence and harm. As a result, they could not share their education with younger generations which has created a substantial risk of this knowledge ever being shared and a loss of their language completely.

The resilience that comes from risky play within forest schools cannot be associated with the resilience required of Indigenous peoples at the hands of ongoing colonization. For forest school programs to connect to Indigenous worldviews acknowledging the use of language such as risk and resilience and what these concepts truly mean within Indigenous culture needs to be included.

Resilience in education can be developed through Indigenous constructs such as identifying and re-examining traditional teachings, which can be accomplished by discussions with Elders. For the Elders, culture and language are crucial to Indigenous resilience in education (Hansen & Antsanen, 2016, p. 14).

Forest Schools are marketed to encourage children to develop environmental awareness and responsibility for caring for the earth by becoming “well-informed and caring stewards of the natural world” (Forest School Canada, 2014, p. 16).

Forest school pedagogy speaks to children developing empathy and appreciation for nature through repeatedly visiting the same place in nature. Taylor 2017 argues that while environmental pedagogies place agency on the human, positioning learners as potential environmental saviours and stewards of the earth, they do acknowledge the importance of avoiding anthropocentric attitudes towards the environment. The value seems to be placed within these programs on learning in and about nature rather than the focus being on learning with the land and developing a balance and an interconnectedness with the more-than-human.

Although awareness of nature feels like a positive aspect of Forest Schools, when considering Indigenous worldviews of the environment, they are deeply rooted in the land and involve more than awareness. Land is understood to be the source of knowledge and first teacher (Simpson, 2002; Styres, 2011). Understanding land in this way creates the need for more than awareness but for a relationship with the land.

Consistent with the Anishinaabe teachings is the spiritual connection to the land, and this relationship is reflected in the Dene language. The Dene word “ne holt hi ne” translates as the “one who created the land,” which suggests the spiritual relationship the Dene people have with the land (Antsanen, 2014 as cited in Hansen et al., 2016, p. 3).

The theory of new materialism speaks to the spiritual connection Indigenous peoples have with the land. When we consider how the land and the more-than-human objects around us speak to and teach us about what they can do and how they are in the world, this connects to the Indigenous worldview that everything has a spirit. Adopting this view creates a relationship and connectedness to all that exists within the natural world. Silencing spirituality in the classroom creates a gap in learning. Exploring traditional spirituality is not about putting forward a religious agenda. It is about calming the mind and developing an awareness of one’s wholeness and interconnectedness.

When incorporating Indigenous views into the Forest School curriculum, it is essential to consider spiritual connection to land and acknowledge whose land it is. Recently, every time I attend a meeting or gathering, a land acknowledgement is given. I have also begun to incorporate land acknowledgements into meetings and classes I facilitate but have been attempting to go beyond this and include discussions about the history of the land, our connections to land and gratitude for what the land provides and teaches us.

For Forest School programs to align with Indigenous perspectives, acknowledging the land should be included, and relationships must be built with Indigenous peoples to learn about the land and the history of it. Recognizing that spiritual connection with land is not part of the western worldview and working also to include this in Forest school practice will have a profound impact on not only creating awareness of nature and land but also on how children respect it by having a deeper connection to it.

Forest School Pedagogy and Indigenous Perspectives: Two-Eyed Seeing

As I started this journey of reconceptualization, I approached it with what I thought was a solid understanding of Forest School pedagogy and the misconception that I would indeed find that there were connections to Indigenous perspectives of knowing, learning, and teaching. As I explored further, I did find that some of the topics I encountered did have some commonalities on the surface. I came to know that there is less truth to that thought as I consider them in the realm of settler colonialism.

I have been recently investigating the idea of two-eyed seeing, an approach in which people view the world with an Indigenous perspective lens on one eye. In contrast, the other eye sees the world with a Western lens. I have yet to find more information and research as to how this might be possible or how to incorporate this into practice, but Bartlett et al. (2012) offers the idea of “Two-eyed Seeing” (p. 331) to weave together Indigenous knowledge with western knowledge to solve environmental issues. I began to think with this more, and I wonder how we might weave together Indigenous ways of teaching, learning, and knowing with Forest School Pedagogy.

Bartlett et al. 2012, offer the following:

We believe an important question must be asked when encouraging or attempting to weave indigenous and mainstream knowledges together within today’s educational curricula, namely: what can curriculum developers do to ensure that efforts remain true to the ways of knowing and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples? This is exceedingly important because, as Elder Albert points out, there is great temptation today for some people to “just make it up” and so “validation, by recognized community Elders and Knowledge Holders, of that which is brought forward is exceedingly important.” (p. 332).

The above quote made it clear to me that building relationships with Indigenous communities and involving them in developing curriculum for Forest and nature-based programs is a place to start. This is precisely what the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada stated on their website that they intended to do, so perhaps the idea of two-eyed seeing is not so far-fetched.

Conclusion

The word conclusion indicates that this story is over, but that is not the case. I would describe this storying of my journey as progressing, developing and evolving-to what? - I am still unsure. I began this story feeling like I was heading somewhere and that my story was not starting, but it was continuing to grow just the same as my perspectives and understandings have.

I began this trek with familiarity with Forest Schools and a trace of knowledge about Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning. However, as I harrowed into how Forest School pedagogy and Indigenous perspectives of education may connect or not, I determined that I was unable to truly find an answer. I discovered that there is still much work to be done to build the relationships necessary to create the type of connection I was hopeful of finding.

For me, listening deeply and learning from Indigenous scholars and knowledge keepers will be the next part of my path, and I would like to think more with the approach of 'two-eyed seeing' to help me navigate how to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into my practice and the practice of the educators I lead. I still have a passion for Forest School pedagogy, and I am confident that if those who work within these programs are dedicated to creating relationships with the Indigenous community, connecting Forest School pedagogy and Indigenous perspective can be possible. Elders and knowledge keepers will play a key role in making this a possibility as they are without question the source of Indigenous knowledge and teachings and are highly respected because of a lifetime of acquiring wisdom and knowledge through continuous experiences and apprenticing with their ancestors. They know the stories, ceremonies and values of the community and are seen as teachers, leaders, and spiritual guides. Elders and knowledge keepers will be a crucial component to identifying methods of teaching and learning according to an Indigenous worldview and to help students feel a part of the curriculum as well as set goals for future generations.

The path toward adapting Forest School pedagogies to include Indigenous perspectives will require educators to see themselves as representing different worldviews and cultural constructions from within their worlds. It will come with a need to be open to seeing their own limits and boundaries of knowing and understanding and to approach 'coming to know' with an open mind, heart, and spirit.

Although I am grateful for the knowledge I have learned thus far, I also respect that I began it with a realization that I was coming to know, and I am continuing to come to know and work towards reconceptualizing children in nature.

...the more humans know about themselves—that is, their connections with everything around them— the greater the celebration of life, the greater the comfort of knowing, and the greater the joy of being. This relationship to space and time, and between living and nonliving things, is not just physical, but psychological and spiritual, in that it involves dreams, visions, knowing, and understanding beyond the simple objectified knowledge of something. In other words, it is inclusive of all the ways that humans are capable of knowing and understanding the world. (Cajete, 2000, p. 75-76).

Recently I had the opportunity to attend a workshop with an Indigenous knowledge keeper. It came to the time of the workshop to open the floor to questions. It did not take long for the question I am guilty of repeatedly asking myself to be asked. "What can we do? What can we, as non-Indigenous educators, do? The response given was much different than in the story shared by Ashton that I highlighted earlier. He said the one thing we can do is keep Indigenous languages alive.

From an Indigenous perspective, all languages are born on a piece of land and are connected to identity and culture. Language is how Indigenous peoples make sense of the world and share cultural knowledge from generation to generation. Language is the carrier and application of knowledge. It acts as a source for all the collective knowledge and experiences that a people, a society, or a nation has (Little Bear, 2009). Indigenous languages contain unique ways of interpreting the world, and they are seen as critical to the maintenance of Indigenous knowledge systems (Hebert, 2000).

I have taken up bringing Indigenous language into our learning environments by providing dual language literature for the educators to share with the children. I have committed to doing my part to help keep Indigenous languages alive in the best way I know how. I feel it is important because, for many Indigenous peoples, loss of language is often associated with loss of spirit (Cajete,1999). Edōsdi Judy Thompson, a Tahltan scholar emphasizes that:

Language and land are interconnected; language is a connection to the land through our ancestors. Our ancestors have named our land—in our language. Through our language, we can hear the voices of our ancestors and their teachings about our culture and our relationship with the land (2012, p. 19).

I would like to close by saying "chi-miigwech," which means "**big thank you.**" Thank you for taking the journey with me towards a re-imagining of children in nature that perhaps leaves behind the notion of nature/culture divide of the romantics and embraces 'natureculture' forests that allow for forest pedagogies and the epistemologies of Indigenous peoples to meet. A place for children to learn with the land, materials, and the more-than-human beyond the fences.

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