

They should all enjoy it, right? An autoethnographic narrative on teaching early childhood student teachers in the natural outdoor environment.

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Growing up with ample experiences in nature and forming a strong connection with it left me to assume that all people equally value its influence and impact on the holistic development and wellbeing of children. That is, until I recently started working in tertiary initial teacher education. Coaching student teachers on facilitating learning for children in nature shed new light on these suppositions of mine when some of them did not share my sentiments. *Wait, they don't?* This autoethnographic narrative of my personal experience with teaching early childhood student teachers in a nature-based, outdoor learning environment highlights a number of benefits of teaching and learning in and from nature. Literature is analysed within the narrative to review the challenges and some alternative strategies, when not all early childhood education students in the natural outdoor learning environment portrayed equal enjoyment of being in and learning from nature.

In the beginning

"I have found that people go to the wilderness for many things, but the most important of these is perspective... They go to the wilderness for the good of their souls"

(Olson, cited in Olson & Backes, 2001, pp. 61-62).

Some of my earliest memories of *the wilderness* were of spending time with family on a family farm in South Africa. Weekends, school holidays and Christmases were all undisputed validations for congregating there with Mum's side of the family. Over time, the farm became kith to me – an attachment to the place as a result of the deeply rooted kinship I experienced there, drawing me back to revisit even in my adult years (Cree & Robb, 2021; West-Pavlov, 2020). Equally significant was the connection I felt to nature while there: the picturesque sunsets, the bright starry night skies, and the daylight hours of us band of cousins roaming and exploring the freedom of the space and time that farm life offers – all of which contributed to what shaped my relationship with the great outdoors. The connection of my bare feet to Mother Earth instantly spread serotonin through my veins (McCallum, 2021) and warmed my soul like nothing else could.

In addition to our farm visits, there were family holidays at the beach. The six-hour drive did not in the least feel like a drag, but instead, held the excitement of road-side stops for Mum's picnic lunch, and the challenge of 'Who-sees-the-sea-first!' In our creative play on the beach and in the bush surrounding the holiday apartment complex, we utilised natural resources such as rocks, pumice, washed-up seaweed and shells, to give our young imaginative minds the freedom to enter a world of creativity and wonder (Schein, 2017, cited in Wilson, 2018). In finding tiny creatures, the way we chose to handle them with either the utmost care or total lack thereof, certainly taught and fostered in us an ethic of care for nature and the life and beauty it holds (Orr, 2004). Young and Elliot (2003) confirm the

importance of these experiences by proposing that “early childhood is a crucial time for making connections with the natural world that sustains us” (p. 9). Children need “soul-enriching experiences to grow into the fullness of what it means to be human. It is through the medium of the natural world that they are most likely to encounter such experiences” (Wilson, 2018, p. 17). I am confident, and grateful, that throughout my upbringing I have had the privilege of many such experiences.

The wonderment of nature

I have on a few occasions been reminded of this childhood sense of wonder as I took my children on excursions into nature since moving to Aotearoa in 2009. Green paddocks dotted with white sheep would not merely be a landscape backdrop to them as we drive past, but one of many exclamations of amazement. The wonderment recurs at the beach or on a nature walk by a stream, and every time I marvel at their child-like reactions of awe of what seems very ordinary to adults. Sailakumar and Naachimuthu (2017) strongly advocate that a child’s wonderment of the world around them, especially as gained from nature-based experiences, is highly conducive to their holistic development and wellbeing. This brings me to appreciate what I have gained from growing up with such ample exposure to nature.

Fast-forward a few years, where I now find myself as a teacher educator of early childhood student teachers. Since I have such high regard for the value of growing up in nature, I also purpose to educate my students on the value of teaching children in nature. “Daily access to nature outdoors in early childhood settings is an imperative”, is what I hope they would grasp (Elliot, 2015, p. 43). Therefore, I make the most of opportunities to teach a variety of curriculum subject areas in the Ōtātara Outdoor Learning Centre (ŌOLC), an outdoor education space at my workplace, Eastern Institute of Technology Hawkes Bay. Educators and learners from various programmes utilise the nature-based and localised context to support and grow their skills within a range of subject areas, “across all sectors from early years through primary, secondary, and tertiary education” (Eastern Institute of Technology, 2022, para.1). Participants in this space are upon first visit aptly introduced to the significance of the locality from te tāngata whenua, Ngāti Pārau, perspective, led by a respected iwi member.

Teaching in nature, and the matter of *place-based learning*

*Ko Ruapehu te maunga e kakapa nei tōku ngākau.
Ko Taupō-nui-a-tia te roto e wātea nei ōku anipā.
(Ruapehu is the mountain that makes my heart flutter.
Taupō is the lake that washes away my worries.)*

I highly value and enjoy the satisfaction from teaching in nature, whether it be children or adults. The fluttering my heart experiences from witnessing them enjoying being in and experiencing nature, reminds me of my own deep love for the natural world. It was not until I started teaching in Aotearoa that I was introduced to the concept of *place-based learning*. “At the practical level ‘place-based education’ sets out to answer two fundamental questions: ‘What is this place?’ and ‘What is our relationship with it?’” (Penetito, 2009, p. 5). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) reminds the teacher that “children learn through relationships with people, places and things” (p. 21). Based upon my own story, it is the relationship and interaction with *place*, and specifically the outdoor natural environment, that is deeply valued as advantageous to the development of children’s autonomous thinking and reasoning, their meaning-making of the world, and the construction of their personal identity as fragment of a bigger whole (Duhn, 2012). Furthermore, from a Māori worldview, a person’s whakapapa describes their connectedness to other people as well as to nature.

“In traditional Māori knowledge, as in many cultures, everything in the world is believed to be related” (Te Ara-The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 2010, p. 8). It elaborates that “[s]uch unity means that nature is the ultimate teacher about life” (p. 9). An integral part of my work with early childhood student teachers revolves around this concept of interconnectedness. Consequently, I now work ardently towards facilitating learning for them in the outdoor environment, for them to grasp the many meaningful and wonderful ways in which children encounter and experience nature, and how this learning could and should be nurtured (Wattchow, cited in Brown, 2008). I work with my students in the ŌOLC on a regular basis, including a range of early childhood education subject content such as mathematics and science, music and movement, and using information and communications technology in nature. Sessions allow for uninterrupted time and space for students to explore, discover, and challenge their own attitudes towards learning in nature. Ideally, they learn how they could intentionally support children’s interests and learning in nature, upon reflecting on their own childhood experiences and relationship with it (Hansen, 2012; Loughran, 2006). Naturally, I eagerly anticipated that all students would agree and be as enthused as I am about the wonderment and plentiful learning opportunities for children in nature.

They should all enjoy it, right?

With much enthusiasm and a spring in my step, I purposely prepare the learning environment for every one of our nature-based sessions. Below are photographs I took of the log cabin used for introductory indoor engagement and the outdoor learning space.



(Photograph: Du Plessis, 2022)



(Photograph: Du Plessis, 2022)

The indoor learning scene is set aesthetically pleasing, complete with an inviting display of resources to facilitate learning and provoke thinking and questions from my students.



(Photograph: Du Plessis, 2022)

With everything in place, I meet my students on campus and take the ten-minute walk with them up a not-too-steep hill to the ŌOLC. This is where my journey of disillusionment starts ...



(Photograph: Du Plessis, 2022)

Memo to self #1: I found it interesting the way some of the students dressed and the footwear they wore for this session, even after we had a briefing on comfortable clothing and shoes. It also puzzled me how the conversations were around how some of them hated going for nature walks, and how they don't tolerate any inconveniences caused when in the natural outdoor environment.

Upward and onward we go, and when we enter the log cabin, students are mostly engaged with the introductory learning material and conversations, which include an overview of the benefits of nature for children, but some seem disconnected. After grouping themselves in threes or fours, and being briefed on the required learning activities, we all head outside. The marginal level of engagement and lack of enthusiasm of a small number of students is noticeable.

Memo to self #2: The students in group 3 showed no commitment towards creating an understanding or engagement in the outdoor activity. The limited and partly off-point result of their groupwork was clearly evident compared to the others'.

As we wrap up the session and debrief the learning that has taken place, many lively comments are made as to how their thinking and teacher development has been advanced and how the session was enjoyed by most, but still surprisingly to me at this juncture, two students told me that this was not the case for them. I walk back to my office after seeing my students off at the bottom of the hill, feeling puzzled about the mixed attitudes towards nature I have observed.

Oh, not? Where to now with my thinking!

Subsequently, with this autoethnography, I aimed to investigate some reasons not all students would share my fervour for nature, as well as strategies to enhance their engagement with and attitudes towards it.

Bixler et al. (cited in Sugiyama et al., 2021) propose that when children play in nature more recurrently, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards engaging in outdoor activities in their adolescent years. Soga et al. (2016) further argue that we can become emotionally disconnected from nature if we do not have ample experiences in nature in childhood. Equally significant, the attitudes of one's parents towards nature could strongly influence one's own sentiment towards wanting to participate in nature-based experiences (Ahmetoglu, 2019). Another possible explanation is that negative, painful or traumatising experiences in nature in the past, may contribute to

negative and resentful attitudes towards engaging in any nature-based outdoor endeavours later in life (Ulrich, cited in Sugiyama et al., 2021). Which leaves me to ponder – were my disengaged students hardly ever exposed to childhood nature experiences? Were their parents less inclined to spend time in nature themselves? Or have they had adverse experiences while connecting with nature in some or other way? These discoveries and ponderings have indeed stirred up empathy for and a greater understanding of some students' negative dispositions towards nature (Van Niekerk, 2017).

Moving forward regarding strategies to progress my students' positive engagement with nature, Richardson et al. (2020) suggest that if they are provided with learning experiences that are more flexible to their interpretation and direction, they are more invested to form a stronger connection with these experiences in nature (Martin, 2004). Richardson et al. (2020) further propose that "sharing of positive emotions" (p. 395) within the group could kindle a more receptive disposition towards nature. With this in mind, grouping students with polarised attitudes towards nature could be an effective strategy. Lastly, Martin et al. (2020) believe that the more frequently people have contact with nature, the higher the likelihood of them feeling more connected to it. Thus, if I made use of the ŌOLC as much as realistically possible, it could lift the attitudes my students harbour towards spending time in nature and teaching children in natural outdoor environments.

Full circle

To state that my experience with working with my students in the natural outdoor learning environment has challenged my expectations of their engagement with nature, does not need repeating here. I arrived in that space excited, moved within it increasingly confused, and have come away from it challenged. In this autoethnographic account, I have set the stage with my childhood nature-based experiences as backdrop, draped it with the benefits nature conveys to the holistic learning and wellbeing of children, and popped it with the colour accents of interconnectedness between *people* and *place*. The actors entered, and as the scenes played out around me, I was exposed to the differences in attitudes towards and engagement with nature. After the final act I bowed out with an altered outlook on what I had thought comes natural to all – the affection towards and value of being in and learning from nature. Ideally, the next on-stage experience will be one step closer to an overall positive experience for all involved.

*In the end there's not much left to say, except the learning has almost led to fray
Reflection deep, revelation stark – has certainly left a mark
Becoming aware that Nature, wildly beautiful and free
Does not touch each human heart as deeply as it does me
But hope there is as always, yes always hope there is –
If I have planted just one seed, my soul it truly frees.*

Author.

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