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Reciprocity and Authenticity in Connecting Children and Animals - Sharryn Clarke

The Provocation

In Melbourne, new innovations have been introduced in response to the importance of re-connecting children with nature, based upon the pedagogies of the NatureSkola in Scandinavian countries, the UK and New Zealand. Initiatives such as *Bush Kinders* and *Beach Kinders* where children are taken out to natural surroundings to explore and experience their learning with their educators have emerged in many sessional preschools and some long day care centres in metropolitan areas. This innovation is starting to take shape in other settings with many variations, such as creating bush tucker gardens in schools, to incorporating wide-open natural spaces within the school setting itself. It addresses a rising concern that “opportunities for play outdoors, particularly in nature, are missing from the daily lives of young children in western countries” (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014). This lack of opportunity has seen alternate methods of preferred play that may impact upon the health and wellbeing of children. This includes engagement with more screen-based sedentary behaviour, unhealthy eating habits and poor sleeping patterns contributing to increased levels in childhood obesity (Leech, McNaughton, & Timperio, 2015). In addition to health risks, there are also implications that children are becoming risk-averse and urbanised which is also typically endorsed through rigidity in regulatory standards and media scaremongering, and as Louv (2010) states “effectively scaring children straight out of the woods and fields” (loc. 176). Furthermore, we also see a society in fear of litigation and therefore impact a literal cushioning effect for children in fear of legal consequences resulting from accidental injury.

As a result, we see a growing number of children and adults staying inside and learning 2-dimensionally rather than being immersed in real world environments. This is exacerbated by the increase in screen time in educational settings where programs such as ‘bring-your-own-device’ are implemented in the primary sector and ‘ipad programs’ implemented in early childhood centres with an anticipated improvement in literacy and numeracy skills (Northrop & Killeen, 2013).

“Schools are spending billions on technology “even as they cut budgets and lay off teachers, with little proof that this approach is improving basic learning” (Richtel 2011 as cited in Louv 2012). One questions, in what way does this support children’s holistic learning, physical and mental wellbeing?

Richard Louv, well known author and founder of the term *nature-deficit disorder* challenges the increasing use of technology in schools and homes that contribute to the sedentary behaviour children are now experiencing as *normal*. Whilst he claims that the term is in no way a scientific or clinical term, he believes that it may have an interesting correlation to other conditions that do. Nature deficit-disorder, as described by Louv may imply that there possibly is a connection between behavioural conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and lack of access to natural outdoor spaces where one can engage in physical activity (Louv, 2010). He discusses that the natural disposition of physically active human behaviour that connects with the outdoors is challenged where education systems and workplaces require us to ‘work and learn’ indoors, going against our innate grain and instinctive urges to be outside and active. To further illustrate this, Louv refers to the work of psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan (partner team) who spent much time studying two types of attention; directed attention (often at the instruction or transmission of information by another) and fascination (where we involuntary pay attention to something that interests us or catches our eye). They found in their studies that “too much directed attention leads to what they called *directed-attention fatigue* marked by impulsive behaviour, agitation, irritation, and inability to concentrate” (Louv, 2010, loc. 1678).

Louv suggests that children should get off their screens, out of their houses and explore nature which fulfils a reciprocal natural relationship being that the more time children spend in nature; the

more likely they learn to value it. “More recent research has suggested time spent in more natural environments (whether it’s a park, a wilderness, or a nature-based classroom or play space) stimulates the senses, improves the ability to learn, and helps students connect the dots of the world” (Louv, 2012, p. 8). Elliott and Chancellor (2014) also suggest that children have “increased confidence, motivation and concentration, increased social, physical and language skills, deeper conceptual understandings and respect for the natural environment” (p. 46). Further to this, it is also understood that spending more time connecting with nature increases children’s physical health as well as social and emotional skills, not to mention improvement in academic outcomes for future life (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Louv, 2011). Wells and Evans (as cited in Warden, 2010) claim that “nature buffers the impact of life’s stresses on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits” (loc. 334). To complement this, “Ming” Kuo (2013) further agrees that engagement with nature in *any form* or *any dose* improves health, decreases levels of obesity and diabetes, and enhances cognitive functioning and longevity of life.

Why this is relevant to me?

It was this very fascination of the study of ‘attention’, connection between nature and health and concepts of reciprocity that led me to investigate further and discover ways to bring nature back into play, or play back into nature for very young children. But there was one caution that arose in my exploration of this concept; a memory from a workshop I attended in 2013 with Tracey Young. Tracey described that connection with nature was more than just planting vegetable gardens and having a chicken coop, but having real connections with animals in an authentic and reciprocal manner where we understand and respect that animals deserve a beautiful life too. From this I challenged my understanding of many of the practices in early childhood (including my own) that had become increasingly popular to support children’s apparent relationship to nature, such as beautifully landscaped gardens, stick insects in enclosures, chickens and rabbits squished up in hutches and coops and not to mention the copious amounts of travelling zoos and ‘hatching kits’ that now circulate the centres and schools. The unethical treatment of these animals disturbed me as I watched a squealing pig being thrown back into a cage, the mouth of a baby crocodile being taped together and listening to a zoo expert explaining how we need snakes to get rid of ‘all those nasty mice;’ all in the name of children’s entertainment and connection to nature. Coupling this with the notion of ‘frolicking purposelessly in the forest’ to connect with nature through play (without curriculum intent), I wondered what was really happening back where it all began; in the Scandinavian countries. *And so I went to Sweden.*

My Encounters in Sweden

Gothenburg and Hunneburg provided some answers for me as I engaged with educators in förskole (preschool) and naturskole (nature school) where children’s learning existed within the indoors and the outdoors come ‘rain or shine’ (i ur och skur).

My first encounter was understanding the Swedish cultural connection to the importance of *being in the outdoors* and found that families considered it strange if educators did not take their children outdoors every day for several hours. There was a strong sentiment of ‘no excuse’ that was embedded in culture and services therefore included the provision of appropriate clothing and supports for children to move in and out of learning environments. There were some preschools that did not have an attached open space, yet this did not prevent the cultural practice and therefore the preschool was granted permission to utilise a local parkland for many hours of the day as their permanent outdoor space; perhaps a regulatory challenge for Australian landscapes.

One of the preschools I visited backed onto woods which were a regular destination for children and opportunity for them to explore nature which was more than just ‘frolicking around’ but included a strong engagement with the ecology and geology of the land, flora and fauna as well as the cultural folklore.

This was where my interest grew and I began to ask further questions and plan some ideas in how to transform ideologies in relation to reciprocity and authenticity in connection with nature. My visit to Hunneberg NaturSkola reaffirmed that this type of learning and connection could be possible as children and youth visited the setting and explored the very life within the woods in its natural way of being. After nervously driving on the opposite side of the car, on the opposite side of the ride, up the mountain hoping I really didn't encounter a bear too closely, I discovered the true beauty of the Swedish woods. This included meeting an elk, observing mossor (moss) and laven (lichen), understanding trees, waterways and multitude of birdlife and how each aspect of nature was



Rolling down hills in spring, summer, autumn and in winter this becomes a hill for tobogganing down on snow.

dependent upon the other. It wasn't just about playing with sticks, but understanding how animals move and use nature to create their own habitats – how they also use sticks. Concepts of death were discussed without hesitation as we came across bones of an elk and hypothesised how such an animal would die in the woods being that in the specific location it was at the head of the food chain due to its size and strength...or was it? This very encounter moved me to question the manner in which we are connecting with nature, what life are we giving our animal counterparts that we use to 'connect with nature' and how is curriculum and ethical practice incorporated into this experience?

There **was so much more to learn and know.**



Exploring life in the woods



Exploring death in the woods



Understanding the ecology of life through mossor and laven.



Understanding the changing Landscapes of the mountains over time (Induced by natural and artificial events).

My Return to Home...and what I was about to do next!

The learnings from my Swedish encounter drew me into deep thought about some of the experiences provided in early childhood settings, particularly inner-city multi-level settings where

access to such landscapes were limited and in some circumstances not possible due to local risk-aversion attitudes and excursion reluctance. I also wanted to challenge the practice of purchasing animals for children to look after as services may see this as a means to 'meet the NQS' or address sustainability. This notion was now fully challenged in my mind and so purchasing animals was not an option for delivering this experience.

Fortunately, an open-minded service owner was ready to get on board with some budding ideas I had to build a 'nature-attached service.' The concept of *nature-attachment* links both to Louv's concepts of nature-deficit and attachment theory; where children develop a sense of connection and mutual reliability through the care and attention that is paid reciprocally between the two. The aim for the service was to embed this ideology of nature-attachment to both indoor and outdoor environments with aims to improve children's understanding and connection to nature and the environment, develop a strong appreciation for the environment, including a robust ecological understanding and how humans impact upon measures of sustainability. More specifically it aimed to utilise a naturally re-created learning environment where children's natural curiosity was stimulated (fascination), thinking skills including executive functioning were supported, and psychosocial development and ethical practices were facilitated. The building was designed to also demonstrate high-level sustainability measures to reduce the carbon footprint and incorporate natural energy and water collection and consumption.

The planned learning environment would incorporate and embed purely natural environments promoting ecological systems that would live inside and outside and promote natural growth of living things, and naturally attract living things. Educators and children would develop resourcefulness in supporting the natural environment to thrive through observation, care and nurturing, whilst reaping benefits from the natural production of anti-oxidants. Therefore, the leadership team for this service would be highly skilled in horticulture, animal care, early childhood education and natural sciences to support the development of the philosophy and professional practice that would enact a *Nature-Attached Curriculum*. The setting would only use enclosures for animals for their protection overnight, however during the day they would co-exist with children in an authentic and reciprocal relationship.

Alas, this was not to happen during the project timeline, due to many protests from the local community which has currently halted the building of this service.

And so my direction changed....

Children's Animal Rescue Initiative & Nature Group (CARING)

A new adventure emerged taking with it the learnings from Sweden and the understanding that perhaps we are not ready for my original big ideas of child-animal immersion. Taking the ideology of nature-attachment but also ethical practices in housing animals within early childhood settings, I set about to create a new way of incorporating this authentic relationship. The aim was to bring a beautiful life to both children and animals in a manner that improved children's sense of empathy, resilience and learning. This project stayed within the original owner of the *halted* early learning centre, but instead combined with the ideas of the service Director, Andrea and one of her team leaders, Leigh, involved designing natural landscapes and enclosures for animals who could not be released to the wild due to injury, illness or neglect. This meant that no animal purchases were to be made that would inadvertently promote breeding and farming for capitalist gain, but instead children would become animal 'rescuers' and 'carers' and as a daily commitment would tend to them under the guidance and advisements of expert knowledge from animal care professionals.

The first group of animals rescued were a family of 5 ring-necked doves who had lived in a small cage their whole life, were not able to neither fly well nor fend for themselves. These birds were 'relinquished' to an official rescue centre awaiting their future. Eagerly the centre built a substantial aviary enclosing an existing established tree where the birds could return to a more natural state of living. Children were also able to enter the aviary and sit on the purpose built balcony attached to the tree and talk to the birds. Over several weeks, with support and diligence from the educator, the children (aged 2 years) and birds made a remarkable connection; they built a nest together. From there the toddlers and birds lived together in harmony building reciprocal trust as the baby bird finally hatched and experienced care from both its natural parents and the children.



Aviary, built large enough to house birds close to their natural state with the incorporation of an existing well established tree.



Now, as new children enrol at the centre, they too experience the joy of living with the birds, and importantly are actively taught how to care for animals and have pets as part of their lives in an ethical manner. This includes the teaching of a two-year-old who naturally wanted to kick and shoo the bird away, to carefully step around the resting places of the baby birds to deliver food to their containers, or the transformation of a young child naturally scared of the flapping of birds to observe wonderment in this skill as they sit up next to them on the balcony. The next stage for this service is to rescue battered chickens and malnourished rabbits where educators and children will confront the poor state of health of these animals, and be instrumental in returning them to health as best they can whilst simultaneously developing an ethical mindset towards how we live with animals in the future.

This is just the beginning of a long journey....

This journey has not concluded; in fact, it is only just beginning as we have now established the first steps of our volunteer organisation *Children's Animal Rescue Initiative & Nature Group (CARING)* and have engaged another service to begin their work in animal rescue early next year. We also anticipate the inclusion of at least one primary school and one secondary school next year to begin their journey of rescuing animals set to be destroyed and provide them with a beautiful life in authenticity and reciprocity with humans; the real connection to nature. Our aim is to track the development of empathy and observe any shifts in aggressive or negative behaviours in children and students as they engage in the program, under the work of a researcher. There is much work yet to be done.

It is with deepest gratitude to AGECS for providing this opportunity to me that has been a life-changing experience. I will continue the journey and work towards bringing this unique and nurturing experience to many more services and the welfare of animals. Thank you also to Birgitta and her team at Hunneberg for sharing such rich pedagogy and experience and the preschools in Gothenburg for allowing me time to breathe in the moment.

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