UNDERSTANDING NATURE PLAY IN THE
CONTEXT OF BUSH KINDERS AND THE
EARLY YEARS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL:
WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

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OVERVIEW

A. Introducing nature play: A global movement

B. Linking to Australian contexts and policies

Roundtable Discussions: Your stories

C. Exploring theory and pedagogy

Roundtable Discussions: Scenarios

D. Researching nature play: Two snapshots
   • Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre
   • KU Ourimbah Preschool and Children’s Centre

Speed dating Discussions: What next for you?

E. Moving forward: Questions and resources
A. INTRODUCING NATURE PLAY:
A GLOBAL MOVEMENT
Nature play contexts.....
In summary…..

Nature play settings are physically characterised by:

• Diverse sensory elements and landscapes e.g. hills, flowers, water, dirt
• Loose materials for play e.g. logs, bark, leaves
• Risk and challenge e.g. balancing, climbing
• Novelty and change e.g. seasons, growth
• Local cultural and geographical relevance e.g. Indigenous meanings, landmarks
But, nature play is more than physical contexts......

- Sustained and repeated engagement with natural settings
- Child-led play based learning approaches
- Children viewed as capable and competent learners, problem solvers and risk takers
- Communities of caring children, educators and families
- An all encompassing ethic of global sustainability
- Indigenous meanings and worldviews
- Theoretical underpinnings such as critical and post-humanist perspectives
- Critical eco-pedagogies that question our ways of being in natural settings
Researching the benefits of nature play

- Increased confidence, motivation and concentration, increased social, physical, imaginative and language skills

- Deeper conceptual understandings and respect for the natural environment

(Gill, 2011; Fjortoft, 2004; Malone & Waite, 2016; O’Brien & Murray, 2008; O’Brien, 2009)
• Families and wider community attitudes towards natural places for play and children’s risk management can be enhanced
  (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Knight, 2009)
• Teacher’s understandings of and relationships with the children are deepened (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014)

• Sustained shared thinking and more frequent child-initiated interactions with teachers prompted by the natural environment and found loose parts (Waters, 2012)
Outdoors in nature offers unplanned, unknown, unpredictable encounters; these are significant provocations for learning

(adapted from Waters, 2012)
Diverse nature play programs

Sooke School, Nature Kindergarten, Vancouver Island, Canada
Saplings Outdoor Program, West Vancouver, Canada
Seattle Children’s Playgarden, USA
Kyoto Forest Preschool, Japan
Fussingo Nature Kindergarten, Denmark
Koiari Park Primary School, PNG
Yarralea St Preschool Bush Kinder, Victoria
Outdoor Connections: School holiday programs, NSW South Coast (https://outdoorconnections.com.au/)
Kings Park, WA, Naturescape
Centennial Parklands, Wild Play, Sydney
B. LINKING TO AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS AND POLICIES

• Many forest preschool/bush kinder/nature playgroup programs emerging, particularly in Victoria (~360) and NSW (~100), some Forest Schools established too.

• Professional early childhood ‘bush kinder’ networks established in Victoria (ECOLN) and NSW Early Years Nature Connections Group, no school-based networks or national association as yet.

• Early Years Bush Connections Training (Fran Hughes, Randwick Campus, Sydney TAFE), plus independent and UK training models.
Curriculum links

Links to all the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and VEYLDF (Victorian DET, 2016) learning outcomes:

**OUTCOME 1:** CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

**OUTCOME 2:** CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

**OUTCOME 3:** CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

**OUTCOME 4:** CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

**OUTCOME 5:** CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS
The VEYLDF (Victorian DET, 2016) eight Practice Principles can all be linked to nature play programs:

• Reflective practice
  - think critically and challenge norms
• Partnerships with families
  - engage families in different ways
• High expectations for every child
  - promote agency and challenge
• Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
  - demonstrate respectful non-human relationships too
The VEYLD (Victorian DET, 2016) eight Practice Principles can all be linked to nature play programs (con’t):

- Equity and diversity
  - promote equity for all species
- Assessment for learning and development
  - rethink assessment in new contexts
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
  - respond to the context and practice slow pedagogy
- Partnerships with professionals
  - create new partnerships
Australian School Curriculum (ACARA, n.d)

**General Learning Capabilities** such as Creative and Critical Thinking, Ethical Understanding and Personal and Social Capability.

**Key Learning Areas** such as geography, science health and physical education.

**Cross Curriculum Priorities** including sustainability and Indigenous history and cultures.
Bush Kinders

The development of bush kinders reflects the mounting body of evidence that outdoor activities such as exploring natural environments, are beneficial to children and contribute to improving children’s health and wellbeing.

In this regulatory fact sheet:

- Selecting the bush kinder site
- Planning for a bush kinder
- Delivering the program at the bush kinder site
- Further information

McDonald’s Nature play programs?

• Nature play programs are socially constructed in cultural, political, social and physical landscapes…. variations on a theme and there is no one right way.

• In the UK nature play programs such as ‘forest school’ have become a commodity to be marketed and governed by a Forest School Association and private training providers that ensure qualifications, risk management, specific skills etc (Leather, 2016)

We must be mindful of how nature play programs are translated into local Australian contexts……
Reflect on your own nature play experiences with children and families....

What is your professional story in nature play so far?
C. EXPLORING THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

• Critical and post-humanist perspectives

• Pedagogies that question our ways of being in natural settings
Critical theory perspective

“I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!”
Critical theory perspective

‘The new problem situation cannot be handled with the old theoretical means’
(Habermas, 1989, p. 302)

Critical theory invites us to interrogate our values, identify contradictions between theory and practice, question power relationships and promote ethically informed action.
A critical perspective invites educators to question

• How have I come to do things this way in bush kinder?
• How have I come to understand nature relationships and sustainability this way?
• How many other ways are there to pedagogically engage and to construct sustainable worldviews?
• ‘Who’ benefits and ‘who’ is marginalised by the way I work in bush kinder?
• What theories shape my work, my ethical stance, which are useful and what other theories could I employ?

(adapted from MacNaughton, 2003)
Post-humanist perspective

Essentially from a post-humanist perspective…

‘the challenge is to think differently about nature, as well as what it means to be human’

(Taylor, 2013, p.66)
A typical post-humanist perhaps?

http://www.sadanduseless.com/2013/03/old-people-wearing-vegetation/
An opportunity for educators to challenge and reflect on…

- How we portray human/non-human relationships?
- Do we see human needs as superseding the needs of all other species?
- Can we question the anthropocentric view that humans dominate/control nature as a resource?
- How can we practice a relational ethic with human and non-humans species?

(Lloro-Bidart, 2016; Plumwood, 2003; Taylor, 2013)
Urgently thinking critically and differently is required to move from the **Anthropocene** defined by human impact on the Earth to the **Ecocene**

.....and in the early years we can do this with children!

(Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill, 2007)
It’s about pedagogical change.....
Calls for change

- **Arlemalm-Hagser** (2013) has argued a disjuncture between promoting children’s stewardship and the need for **critical discussion** about human relationships with nature and **children being vocal participants**.

- **Kelly & White** (2013, p. 38) in *The Ngahere Project* advocate **active pedagogical roles**, seeing pedagogy as **problem-posing**.

- **Grogan** (2014) suggests ECEfS is in the ‘shadows’ and advocates more **dynamic and proactive ECEfS pedagogies**.

- **Taylor** (2013, p.121-124) advocates **new pedagogies** attending to children’s relational ethics, emplacement in common worlds and collective inquiry.
Read your scenario and share ideas about how you might pedagogically engage with children here?

What theories, ethics or worldviews underpin your ideas?
D. RESEARCHING NATURE PLAY: TWO SNAPSHOT

Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre (TEEC)

KU Ourimbah Preschool and Children’s Centre
Acknowledgements

Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre (TEEC)

Research team:
• Dr Sue Elliott, Dr Nadya Rizk & Dr Subhashni Taylor, University of New England
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Research team:
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• Dr Sue Elliott, University of New England

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KU Children’s Services, Sydney
Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre (TEEC)
Framing the research project

Research questions:

• What play affordances do children perceive and what appears to characterise their selections and reasoning within the new nature playspace at Thalgarrah EEC?

• How do accompanying teachers perceive nature play and interpret children’s nature play and learning at Thalgarrah EEC?
Theoretical Framing:

- **Gibson’s (1986) theory of affordances**
- **Social constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005)**
- **UN Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989)**

Methodology:

*Mosaic methodology which identifies children as active researchers and incorporates multiple authentic ways of listening to children's views about their experiences* (Clark, 2005).
Participants:

Children aged 3-8 years and their teachers, an early childhood and a school group visited TEEC weekly over a six week period to experience the nature playspace.

Methods:

• **Child-led walking interviews** (Greenfield, 2011) were conducted during the fifth or sixth visits, children were invited to show the researcher their ‘best place to play’, take a photo of the place with an Ipad and talk about their reasons.

• Later, the researcher visited the children in their settings to conduct a **small focus group discussion** to prioritise their ideas about the nature playspace.

• Teachers were invited to complete a **questionnaire** about their experiences in the nature playspace.
Preliminary Findings

1. Children’s most and least popular Nature play spaces

2. Children’s reasoning sustaining their selections
### Preliminary Findings (cont’d)

- **Most popular spaces for Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most popular space</th>
<th>Frequency count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rope swing</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muddy waterhole</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirt hill</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trickle hill</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning log</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandpit</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Preliminary Findings (cont’d)

- Least popular spaces for children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least popular space</th>
<th>Frequency count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muddy kitchen</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocks and rocks</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamboo patch</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Preliminary Findings (cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least popular (children)</th>
<th>Least popular (teacher)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mud Kitchen</td>
<td>Bamboo plantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocks and rocks</td>
<td>Sandpit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamboo plantation</td>
<td>Swing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocks and rocks</td>
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<td>Sandpit</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Preliminary Findings (cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Official terminology (Matt’s)</th>
<th>Children’s terminologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The leaning log</td>
<td>The balancing log; the wobbly log</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bamboo plantation</td>
<td>The bamboo forest, the bamboo sticks; the spy place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The muddy waterhole</td>
<td>The muddy river; The big river; The muddy puddle; The pond; the creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sandpit</td>
<td>The bone pit; the bone dig area;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dirt pile</td>
<td>The dirt hill; the mining hill; the rock hill; The play mountain; the clay mountain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasoning sustaining children’s choices

• Enjoyment
• Social element
• Risk factor
• Physical landscape

Other reasons included……

• Being able to manipulate the space (e.g. throwing items; rearranging loose parts; placing a bone on the rope swing…)
• Ability to use the space in imaginative ways (e.g. hunting for tadpoles, mining for fossils or gold, fishing…)

Preliminary Findings (cont’d)
Quotes from teachers

“A highly valuable program that I know will be a highlight for the children for years to come. I hope this is potentially the beginning of how this type of play/learning can be integrated within schools in our area.”

“Feedback from parents was always positive (muddy washing aside) that their children were always energized and excited to go to school each Monday.”

“The children’s behaviour was impressive in the Nature Play area as they all played cooperatively together and there was also individualised play and exploration.”

“It allowed students to set their own boundaries and challenge themselves.”
**KU Ourimbah: Rationale/context**

1. Very limited Australian research re nature play, including conceptual learning
2. Unique rainforest setting on-campus with frogs iconic in the region
3. Ongoing children’s interests in flora/fauna/maps due to daily on campus walks
4. Practitioner/researcher role based on established relationships with children, families and community partners
5. Project approach is a familiar and transferable curriculum approach (Katz, Chard & Kogan, 2014)
6. Strong alignment with centre philosophy and pedagogy, plus EYLF and NQS
7. Tangible accessible outcome/artefact to support broader advocacy and communication
Framing the research project: Key research question

- How might co-constructed conceptual learning occur within a project approach to children’s creation of artefacts about frogs in their local environs.
Theoretical framing:

• Social constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005)
• Interpretive research paradigm (Mukherji & Albon, 2015).

Methodology:

• Narrative or ‘story telling focus’ about the three project approach phases implemented by the children and researcher/practitioner.
Participants:

- Ten children aged 4-5 years participated with the practitioner/researcher over 4 week period, two consecutive days each week

Methods:

- Video diary of interactions created throughout the project
- Focus groups with children, one in each of the three project approach phases
- Reflective journal by the practitioner/researcher including critical friend input
- Creation of artefact(s) and documents during the project
Preliminary findings

Phase 1: Beginning the project
What creatures do we notice in our local setting?

Phase 2: Project in progress
What can we find out by researching with others about Gambusia fish and frogs?

Phase 3: Concluding the project
Telling everybody what we know?
Preliminary findings (con’t)

Conceptual understandings:
Belonging and balance

Artefacts as vehicles for communication:
- Biotopic map
- Drawings and plans
- Project book
- Letters
- 3D constructions
- Green screen stories
SPEED DATING DISCUSSIONS

What next for you?
What has provoked or challenged your thinking?
What might you do differently?
E. MOVING FORWARD: QUESTIONS AND RESOURCES

• How do we implement nature play programs in ways that reflect early years philosophies, pedagogies and the EYLF/VEYLF?

• How do we manage risk with children in uniquely Australian contexts?

• Is specific training essential or optional? What type of training is relevant in Australia?
• How do we acknowledge and incorporate Indigenous perspectives?

• How do we care for and maintain the natural play spaces that we use in the longer term?

• How do we pedagogically explore beyond ‘sentiments of nature stewardship’ with children towards ethical worldviews and the ECOcene?
Key international resources

• Publications by Sarah Knight, Claire Warden, Jane Williams-Siegfredsen

• Insideout Nature: tours, training, resources
  www.insideoutnature.com

• UK Forest School Association established in 2012
  http://www.forestschoolassociation.org/

• Forest School Canada established in 2012
  http://www.forestschoolcanada.ca/home/about-us

• Also, online ‘forest preschool’ or ‘nature kindergarten’ searches will locate a growing number of resources
Australian Resources

- Boroondara Council Protecting our bushland areas
  Guidelines for Bush Kinders
- ECOLN http://earlychildhoodoutdoorlearning.weebly.com/
- Victorian Nature Play Week, April 2018
  http://natureplayweek.org.au/
- Kids in Nature Australia

Nature Play Government supported initiatives:
Did we listen? Leunig is still telling us no device is needed!

- What are you doing?
  - I'm using my device...
  - My device is the sky.

- Does your device have many applications?
  - Yes. It has sun, moon, clouds, and birds.

- And do you have to recharge your device very often?
  - I don't ever have to recharge my device. It recharges me.
Photo acknowledgements

Thanks to these people and places for their inspiration:
  Balnarring Kindergarten Beach Kinder, Victoria
  Centennial Parklands, Wild Play, NSW
  Cincinnati Nature Centre, Nature Preschool, USA
  Fussingo Nature Kindergarten, Denmark
  Kings Park Rio Tinto Naturescape, Western Australia
  Kyoto Forest Preschool, Japan
  Koiari Park School, PNG
  Outdoor Connections, Holiday Programs, NSW
  Quirindhi Preschool, NSW
  Saplings Outdoor Program, West Vancouver
  Seattle Children’s Playgarden, USA
  Sooke School Nature Kindergarten, Vancouver Island, Canada
  Westgarth Kindergarten Bush Kinder, Victoria
  Yarralea Preschool Bush Kinder, Victoria

Thanks to the wonderful Leunig also for the sunrise/TV and device cartoons!
References


References


