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PARTNERSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FOREST

Heidi Bruce, MA

Abstract

Heidi Bruce is a founding board member of the Orcas Island Forest School, an outdoor early childhood education program located on Orcas Island, Washington State. In this article, she describes the interconnectedness of nature-based education and Partnership education, as outlined in Riane Eisler's book, *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century* (2000). She also shares her experience in advocating for the first legislation in the country that creates a pilot program for licensing nature-based early childhood education programs.

Keywords: Partnership education, forest school, nature-based education, eco-literacy, early childhood education legislation

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If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.

David Sobel

Each weekday morning, as my four-year old son Douglas and I take the right turn off Enchanted Forest Road onto the lane that leads to his school, we greet the moss-decorated forest with "*Buenos dias bosque...helechos...ortigas*" (Good morning forest...ferns...nettles). The seasonal changes in flora nudge me to further develop my woodsy Spanish vernacular. In addition to raising my son bilingually, my hope is that he will be eco-literate as well.

Douglas attends the Orcas Island Forest School (OIFS)—a play-based, all-weather, outdoor early childhood education program that I helped co-found in 2015. When asked

to attend a potluck about the prospect of starting a *Waldkindergarten* (German for forest kindergarten) on the island, I was instantly drawn in—not only by the thought of Douglas’ involvement, but also because I wanted to ensure that this approach to early childhood education would be accessible to students from a wide variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Research shows that youth’s experiences in and access to nature and green spaces vary according to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Strife & Downey, 2009).

While northern European countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Germany are usually cited as having developed Forest School pedagogy in the mid-1900s, other indigenous cultures the world over have, for millennia, used place-based, seasonal, fully-immersed outdoor education as a way of passing on the important bio-cultural knowledge their youth need to thrive in their respective ecological niches. Yet, given mainstream education’s over-emphasis on “newer is better”, looking back to what has worked before is typically frowned upon.

PARTNERSHIP EDUCATION

In her seminal work, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1988), Riane Eisler looks at the social systems that support human capacities for consciousness, caring, and creativity—and, alternately, for insensitivity, cruelty, and destructiveness. At one end of the continuum she describes a partnership model, which embodies equity, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, and gender-fairness. At the other end is a dominator model, which emphasizes control, authoritarianism, violence, gender discrimination, and environmental destruction (Eisler, 2014). Eisler argues that one of the key components of shifting toward a partnership-based society is transforming education.

In her review of Eisler’s book, *Tomorrow’s Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century*, Stanford University professor of education Nel Noddings (2017) writes, “Riane Eisler argues persuasively that the adoption of a partnership

model in both schools and the larger society is essential for human life to flourishWith her, I believe that human happiness, if not survival itself, depends on it.” In the book, Eisler outlines three core elements of partnership education: *process*, *content*, and *structure*.

Process: How we learn and teach

According to Eisler, partnership schools integrate time-tested as well as new processes in which:

- children are seen as partners in learning;
- adults model facilitation rather than control;
- every child’s unique abilities are fostered;
- children are treated with empathy and caring;
- diverse learning styles are honored;
- cooperative learning and individual responsibility are combined;
- learning is a reciprocal activity between teacher and child;
- students learn through experiential opportunities;
- young people think for themselves and trust their observations and experiences; and
- students develop and use skills of caring and ethical behavior. (Eisler, 2009)

Complementing this framework, Forest Schools view participants as:

- equal, unique, and valuable in a learner-centered approach;
- competent to explore and discover through experiential learning;
- entitled to experience appropriate risk and challenge;
- entitled to choose, initiate, and drive their own learning and development;
- entitled to holistic development by which they develop emotional resilience, confidence, independence, and creativity; and

- entitled to develop strong positive relationships with themselves, other people, and the natural world. (Forest School Association, 2017)

Content: What we learn and teach

Partnership-centered curriculum combines academic content with the knowledge and skills students need for a sustainable, equitable, and peaceful future. Woven into this learning tapestry are themes such as environmental consciousness, emotional literacy, nonviolent conflict resolution, and self-regulation.

Forest Schools curricula are rooted in the belief that the natural environment is an ideal classroom for cultivating the mind, body, emotions, and spirit of every child. When asked if I'm worried that my son might get behind in learning his ABC's and numbers if he doesn't go to a "real" pre-school, I say, "Not at all. I'm more concerned that he learns how to be kind and curious, and that he cultivates a deep connection to place. Other skills can unfold later." The Forest School model provides him with a unique opportunity to develop this sense of wonder for the natural world, and fosters compassion and empathy for the earth and all its creatures.

In the article, *Restoring Peace: Six Ways Nature in Our Lives Can Reduce the Violence in Our World*, Richard Louv (2013), Co-Founder and Chairman Emeritus of the Children & Nature Network, writes that, "By bringing nature into our lives, we invite humility". In researching the connection between nature and human behavior, Frances Kuo, professor of natural resources, environmental science, and psychology at the University of Illinois, states that, "[H]umans living in a neighborhood stripped of nature undergo patterns of social, psychological, and physical breakdown similar to those observed in animals deprived of their natural habitat...In animals, what you see is increased aggression, disrupted parenting patterns, and disrupted social hierarchies" (in Louv, 2013).

Similarly, Australian education researchers Amanda Lloyd and Tonia Gray (2014) write that “[P]ro-environmental behavior, especially in the early years, has a causal relationship with connectivity to the natural environment” (p. 1). In the *Connection to Nature Index*, which measures enjoyment of nature, empathy for creatures, sense of oneness, and sense of responsibility, Cheng and Monroe (2010) reveal that “[C]hildren’s connection to nature, previous experiences in nature, perceived family values towards nature, and perceived self-efficacy positively influenced their interest in performing environmentally friendly behaviors” (p.31). Thus, early childhood education is a highly influential medium for nurturing an affinity with the natural world—and a desire to care for it.

Structure: Where we learn and teach

According to Eisler, partnership education structure comprises two parts: the *physical structure* and the *organizational structure* (the social infrastructure).

Physical structure (the spatial environment). Physical environments should be welcoming, safe spaces; provide full accessibility, with architectural barriers removed; and be playgrounds that facilitate cooperation and celebrate learning.

The Orcas Island Forest School is a fully outdoor early childhood education program. What this looks like on the ground is that regardless of the weather—rain, sleet, snow, wind, etc.—the children and teachers are outdoors the entire time. This gives them the freedom to explore and learn, based on their curiosity about what a particular season offers rather than on materials or play structures with narrowly pre-determined purposes.

Louv (2013) writes that researchers have observed that when children played in an environment dominated by play structures rather than natural features, they established social hierarchies through physical competence. In nature-based play areas, children engaged in more fantasy play, and their social standing became less focused

on physical abilities and more on language skills, creativity, and inventiveness. It also provided greater opportunities for boys and girls to play together in egalitarian ways.

Organizational structure (the social infrastructure). The way a school is structured should facilitate inclusiveness in decision-making and learning together. According to Eisler, one would expect to see:

- hierarchies of actualization in which accountability flows in every direction, rather than hierarchies of control and domination in which accountability only flows from the bottom up;
- governance that allows for shared decision-making between administration, staff, and students;
- collaborative planning, collegial dialogue, and continuous learning (such as professional staff development);
- teachers mentoring each other;
- resource allocations that maximize support for learning; and
- inclusion of parents and other community members as volunteers. (Eisler, 2009)

The Orcas Island Forest School models these organizational principles with a board that is open and accessible to staff, parents, and the community. Staff regularly attend board meetings and board retreats in order to ensure their active participation in decision-making. Through weekly meetings with our program coordinator (a volunteer board member), teachers are given time and space to reflect on student and program growth and share best practices. Parent/teacher/community-engagement events such as a fall cider press, winter solstice lantern walk, spring farm-to-table pizza night, and parent discussion groups throughout the year help ensure parent engagement and a broader connection to the Orcas community.

Financially, because OIFS doesn't have the usual brick and mortar costs such as building maintenance, electricity, etc., a larger percentage of our budget is allocated to teacher

salaries, to ensure a living wage. Additionally, we budget for annual professional development for our teachers and board members.

EXPANDING ACCESS

As I mentioned in the introduction, when asked to help start a Forest School, I was concerned about equity and accessibility. It is no secret that in the United States, environmental or outdoor education has primarily been a white, middle-to-upper class experience. At the 2017 Natural Start Alliance conference in Seattle the theme was *Education in Context: Nature, Culture, and Equity*. Numerous discussions were held on the push-pull factors to expanding access to nature-based programs.

Forest schools are in high demand, yet access to such programs is limited. The bind these schools find themselves in (OIFS included) is that in order to operate an early childhood education program for more than four hours per day—and thereby serve the needs of working families, including those eligible for state-subsidized tuition—a preschool must be licensed by the state, but Forest Schools don't fit traditional state licensing requirements.

Rather than adjusting our school to fit the state's current licensing parameters, OIFS collaborated with a coalition of nature-based schools in Washington state and with our local state senator, Kevin Ranker, to put forth the first legislation in the country (SB 5357) that establishes a four-year pilot project to license outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs that operate three or more hours per day. Ensuring equity in access to these programs was a main goal of the bill.

In the midst of intense national political divisions—and domination—it was refreshing to see that Senate Bill 5357 received overwhelming bipartisan support. Legislators from various ideological standings found something in this bill that appealed to them. For those championing the environmental movement, nature-based preschools are a natural fit. Those concerned about fiscal spending welcomed the notion that Forest schools

cost roughly 30% less to operate than brick-and-mortar preschools. And for those concerned about health outcomes for children, the physical benefits of being active in the outdoors all day provided strong appeal. It didn't hurt that I took Douglas to Olympia (Washington's state's capitol) with me to testify before both the State Senate and the House—in rain-slickers and all.

NEXT STEPS

Senate Bill 5357 directed the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (formerly the Department of Early Learning) to create an advisory panel, in conjunction with the above-mentioned coalition, to coordinate the planning phases of the pilot project. I serve on that panel, and currently we are recruiting ten pilot sites from various geographic regions in Washington State to join as full-day participants in the 2018-2019 school year. Other schools that are not yet ready to shift toward full-day programs are welcome to join as “observer-only” schools—with the option to become participants in the future.

In its report, “Education for Sustainable Development: Review of process and learning”, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO (2011), promotes interdisciplinary, problem solving and inquiry based pedagogy as essential components of holistic education. Tricia Herbert (2008), contributing author to another UNESCO report entitled “The contribution of early childhood education to a sustainable society” writes that, “[N]ature is wonderfully interdisciplinary, everything is woven together and given meaning by seeing it in its context and observing it over time. Engagement through exploration with these aspects of the local environment helps a child gradually develop eco-literacy or eco-intelligence” (p.64). She outlines the following priorities for eco-literacy development, which offer similarities to Forest School and Partnership pedagogy:

- developing varied learning experiences integrating many knowledge areas;

- allowing unstructured time - time “to be” and to contemplate, in a natural setting;
- observing changes in an environment over time;
- playing a valued part in real-life activities;
- using tools and begin to develop practical skills;
- engaging in physical challenges and test one’s limits;
- developing collaborative, investigative, and critical thinking skills; and
- encouraging a sense of wonder about the natural world. (Herbert, 2008)

With these skills as a foundation, my hope is that Douglas (who is now in his third year of Forest School)—and other children the world over—will reclaim the intimate connection to nature that many seem to have lost. Perhaps then they can help implement creative solutions (old and new) to the myriad of threats we face from climate change and dominance-based societies.

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Heidi Bruce, MA, is a mother, researcher, and teacher. Her areas of focus include Partnership Studies, Fourth World geopolitics, migration, conflict transformation, and bio-cultural education. In addition to her role as Managing Editor of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, she is a Senior Researcher for the Center for World Indigenous Studies and Managing Editor of their peer-reviewed publication, the *Fourth World Journal*. She holds a Master degree in Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management from the SIT Graduate Institute in Vermont, USA.

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