

The Importance of Nature as it Relates to Healthy Human Development

While explaining the premise of his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv states, “This book explores the increasing divide between the young & the natural world, and the environmental, social, psychological, and spiritual implications of that change. It also describes the accumulating research that reveals the necessity of contact with nature, for healthy child - and adult - development.” (Louv 2). The words, “healthy child & adult development” should be at the forefront of every conversation and decision making process that occurs in the world of education. However, it sadly seems that our society and school systems are heading in the opposite direction. In my research I have discovered that this divide between children and the outdoors is the result of a shift in values and understanding of healthy child development. This divide is perpetuated by parents and caregivers, as well as the major institutions of our technological age.

The expanding disconnect from nature directly correlates to the alarming trend in our society, a shift from the outdoors to increasing time spent indoors. This adversely affects all people, children especially. As more and more children and adults drift indoors, and the outdoors become but a distant memory, different technologies begin to take its place. In our modern technological world, screens such as T.V., ipad, computers, video games, and the internet are omnipresent. James Sallis, program director of the Active Living Research Program for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation states, “These technologies not only contributed to a sedentary childhood, but are also linked to mental health problems.”(Louv 36). Renowned Integrative Child, Adolescent & Adult Psychiatrist, Victoria L. Dunckly, M.D. adds supporting evidence to James Sallis’s quote in her article for *Psychology Today* titled: *Autism and ScreenTime, Special*

Brains, Special Risks, when she said, “Screen time replaces the very things we know to be critical to brain development; bonding, movement, eye contact, face-to-face verbal interactions, loving touch, exercise, free play, and exposure to nature & the outdoors. Reduced exposure to these factors negatively impact brain integration, IQ, and resilience in all children.”(Victoria L. Dunckley)

Don't be discouraged though, for there is still hope. There are a handful of parents, community members, developmentalist, scientists, and farmers who see the developmental benefits of the outdoors, as well as the benefits of involvement in one's community. In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv says, “Children need nature for the healthy development of their senses, and therefore, for learning & creativity. This need is revealed in two ways: by an examination of what happens to the senses of the young when they lose connection with nature; and by witnessing the sensory magic that occurs when young people - even those beyond childhood - are exposed to even the smallest direct experience of a natural setting.” (Louv 54). Louv may not be a developmentalist, but in the above quote he uses the word “sensory.” That's because he understands our senses are critical to the way we perceive the world around us, and that our lack of exposure to the outdoors not only negatively affects our senses, but has the potential to delay the developing brain.

By helping people connect with the outdoors, parents and community members are “planting the seeds” and fostering the type of love for one's environment and surroundings that not only encourages lifelong stewardship to the communities and ecosystems which surround them, but most importantly gives children the tools that they can use to live the most happy and independent life possible.

Making the invisible visible is an important concept which revolves around socially and emotionally engaged ecoliteracy in the classroom and in communities. Throughout the book, *Eco Literate*, numerous educators and community members strive to make the invisible visible, in attempts to, as Goleman, Bennett and Barlow put it, “create the conditions for learning that nurture hands-on hope.” (p. 134). Creating the conditions that foster this type of emotionally engaged ecoliteracy does not fall solely on the shoulders of individuals, but rather on multiple shoulders of interdisciplinary teams who strive and work towards personally meaningful issues and causes.

Seeing students as contributing members of an interdisciplinary team is one of the first steps in creating a foundation for socially and emotionally engaged ecoliteracy. Goleman, Bennett and Barlow touch on this concept of seeing students as partners or teammates rather than simply students when they say, “Socially and emotionally engaged ecoliteracy offers a wise and gentle process through which educators can positively join with their students to understand the reality of the ecological problems we now face- and creatively reimagine solutions. It allows school communities to transform topics that are too often presented as immobilizing or seemingly distant threats into highly relevant and worthy challenges that give young people the experience of working to make a difference in their particular part of the world.” (p. 133).

By allowing students to see themselves as effective collaborators, all of whom bring important skills and insights to the table, as well as allowing them to pursue their interests and questions, educators are “fertilizing the seeds” for their students that will eventually blossom into a lifetime of ecological and community involvement. This concept is wonderfully touched on when Goleman, Bennett and Barlow say, “educators can help create a safe container for exploration, effectively guide students in inquiries that reveal the connections that might

otherwise remain unseen, and know when to push and when to pull back. Above all, it permits teachers to contribute to important meaningful education that builds-in vitally important ways- on the social and emotional learning skills that decades of research have now shown to foster student achievement, inspire better attitudes, and cultivate improved behavior. It also plants the seeds for a positive relationship with the natural world that can sustain a young person's interests and involvement for a lifetime." (p. 133).

Helping to foster a sense of interconnectedness between one's community as well as the environment in which they live is another concept found throughout our readings of *Eco Literate*. In the wake of the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig that exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, educator Betty Burkes demonstrates her understanding on the importance of fostering this sense of interconnectedness when she says, "As a teacher, one is always inquiring and looking for ways to make learning real. So I decided it would be a good idea for them to get out of their seats, walk around with a paper and pencil, notice what is in the room, and imagine where it is coming from. In doing that, they discovered how dependent their school life is on oil." (p. 60). The importance of this little exercise is later touched on when Goleman, Bennett and Barlow say, "Discussions about how schools might reduce their dependence on oil followed. This exercise helped make the issue not only personally relevant to students but also an experience that could lead to lasting changes." (p. 60).

Exercises such as the above, as well as allowing students to formulate their own questions which surround the topics that are being discussed, allows for a deeper understanding of the issues that are encompassed within each topic. Such an understanding is exemplified when one student was posed with the question, "who is really responsible for the oil spill in the Gulf-BP or everyone who uses oil?"(p.60), when he argues, "oil companies are a lot like gun

manufacturers. When someone is shot and killed, we don't hold the person who made the gun responsible but rather the person who used it." (p. 60).

Striving to make the invisible visible for your students, as well as helping to foster a sense of interconnectedness between the communities and the environment in which they live are important concepts to keep in mind while trying to create a foundation for ecoliteracy. In doing so, educators are "watering the seeds" and fostering the type of love for one's environment that encourages lifelong stewardship to the communities and ecosystems which surround them. This concept is wonderfully touched on when Goleman, Bennett & Barlow say, "After all, humans have shown that when they grasp that their actions are threatening one of life's support systems-and do so on a deep level that taps both the cognitive and the feeling ways of knowing-they can take effective action." (p.4). That idea is nicely concluded when Goleman, Bennett & Barlow say, "developing emotional, social, and ecological intelligence can help us now effectively address the remaining threats to our Earth's life support system." (p.4).

Lastly let's touch on play. Play? Well, play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as a right for every child. They include shelter, food, freedom from fear, and play as rights that every child should have. This isn't just because play is fun, it's simply how children develop. This concept is touched on when Richard Louv points out, "The Physical exercise and emotional stretching that children enjoy in unorganized play is more varied and less time-bound than is found in organized sports. Playtime- especially unstructured, imaginative, exploratory play- is increasingly recognized as an essential component of wholesome child development." (p. 48). Imaginative play is a fundamental developmental milestone that is not being focused on nearly enough in this day in age. Video games, televisions, computers, cartoons and electronic/flashing

toys are depriving children of imaginative play as well as the natural world surrounding them. Imaginative play helps kids develop emotionally as well as socially, through a number of different opportunities which present themselves during play, such as role playing, turn taking, sharing, interpreting others ideas, gray area thinking, etc. etc. The importance of imaginative play and the way in which nature helps foster imagination is nicely touched on when Sebastiano Santostefano, director of the Institute for Child and Adolescent Development's Therapeutic Garden explains that, "nature has the power to shape our psyche as well as helping kids through traumatic experiences. Playing outdoors, whether along a river or in an alleyway, is how a kid works through issues. We have a small hill, a mound-and for one kid at a certain point in therapy it was a grave; for another, it was the belly of a pregnant woman. The point is obvious: children interpret and give meaning to a piece of landscape, and the same piece can be interpreted differently. Usually, if you use traditional puppets and games, there are limits. A policeman puppet is usually a policeman; a kid rarely makes it something else. But with landscape, it's much more engaging, and you're giving the child ways of expressing what's within." (p. 53). It's apparent that nature provides a number of different benefits for children and adults alike, and it's surprising that with all the information about nature's positive influence on emotional and physical health that education seems to be moving in the opposite direction in regards to more screen time and indoor classroom activities, rather than allowing it to "guide the way classrooms are conceived, houses built, and neighborhoods shaped." (Louv 54). Our societies ever increasing disconnect with nature seems to be expanding from generation to generation. Why, with all the information available in regards to the positive influences nature has on development and our psyche, is this disconnect continuing to grow? And with this disconnect that has been

happening for some time now, how can we find young/new educators who value nature, as well as find it important enough to teach our kids?

It only seems fitting for me to end this paper with a quote from one of the great American novelists, poets, environmental activist, cultural critics, and farmer, Wendell Berry. In his 1977 book *The Unsettling of America* he said, “Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health. And what our society does its best to disguise from us is how ordinary, how commonly attainable, health is. We lose our health - and create profitable diseases and dependences - by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. In gardening, for instance, one works with the body to feed the body. The work, if it is knowledgeable, makes for excellent food. And it makes us hungry. The work thus makes eating both nourishing and joyful, not consumptive, and keeps the eater from getting weak. This is health, wholeness, a source of delight. And such a solution, unlike the typical industrial solution, does not cause new problems.” (Berry 138). While that was written in the 1970’s, I still find it to hold true. It offers what seems to be a simple solution to complex problems, many of which we are still facing today, problems which come in the form of education reform, industrial agriculture, and damaging educational models. But while it may be disheartening to see how little progress has occurred since the time of Berry’s writing, hope is found in the grassroots organizations, schools that focus on healthy child development such as Waldorf Schools, as well as in the minds of individuals who find our current institutions worthy of change.

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