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# Braiding Identities in Nature through Preschool

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## *Braiding Identities in Nature through Preschool*

*Hannah E. Newell, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*Preschool is an age when many things are yet to be discovered. This capstone presentation engages the public in what free play in nature is like. Often as adults, we lose our ability to think with our imagination first. Preschool aged children can lose this ability as well if they are not allowed the time to explore freely. More importantly, they can lose the opportunity to develop a sense of place making it less likely that they will feel connected to nature. It is also pertinent that children of this age are introduced to the many differences and similarities that make our species human as well as what makes every other species unique. Therefore, this presentation proposes that all preschools can include time out in nature that encourages free play and a curriculum around anti-bias pedagogy.*

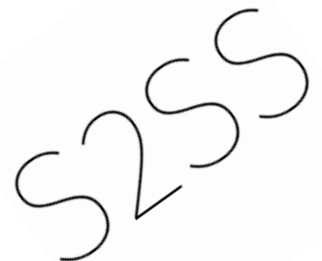
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**Keywords:** *Nature preschool, anti-bias curriculum, free play, sense of place*

Welcome to the Lily Shelter and the Environmental Learning Center. I stand before you today to speak about the nature of our preschools. More specifically, the model of nature preschools and how they should be woven into the fabric of our mainstream preschool system and include an anti-bias pedagogy. My inspiration for this topic comes from the natural elements that currently surround you.

This beautiful landscape has not only housed me over the past year, but has been home to many people before me. I've had the honor of hearing stories and visiting some of the homes of trappers, gold miners and residents of old like Gaspar Petta, Lucinda Davis, John McMillan, and many more. I also hold the respect for those who came before, taking care of this land since time immemorial who have used these mountains and valleys as a trade route and home. The groups that I do know of are the Upper Skagit, the Coast Salish and the Okanagan tribes. I have learned about this landscape as much as I could over the past year and have developed a deep sense of place and ecological identity that has been woven from the fabric of this environment. Much of it revolves around birdsong, which is why we are out here in the cold this morning.

That being said, I want you to start to take notice of what phase of the Earth cycle we are in. I challenge you to go beyond what you have heard before, and think about what you feel is happening around you, using all of your senses.



### **Spring Nature Activity**

To me, I feel like spring is just around the corner. Birds are finding their voices and singing their spring songs like the tiny Pacific Wren with its nonsensical whistle, the colorful Varied Thrush with its one long note, and the curious Dark-eyed Juncos sounding like a referee's whistle. The buds on plants are to the point that they're getting ready to pop open at the very first ray of warm light. The bears are just starting to feed their empty bellies after their long winter hibernation. Graduate students are starting to feel the stresses of school begin to shed off and breaths of forgiveness and compassion are being drawn out.

Now, it is time to get in touch with your inner child. We are talking about preschool today, so it is only natural that we try to embody the audience that we will be exploring.

Go ahead and close your eyes and take a trip with me. Take a deep breath in and out. Imagine yourself growing young. Your hands are getting smaller and softer, your balance isn't as steady as it once was when you were an adult. Instead, you're just discovering how difficult it is to stand on one leg, how you have to tighten your abdominals to keep yourself upright. But your desire to climb trees and explore overcomes your fear of getting hurt or being too cold on this crisp morning. Any discomfort you feel sheds away as you open your eyes and look around at your surroundings with a bright sense of how new and interesting everything is. You just want to touch and feel everything! You are now a three to five year old with a strong desire to explore. Every inch of green is calling your name. Every branch begging you to climb, touch or smell. Every bird or squirrel enticing a chase around the forest.

So before we go inside, I want your three to five year old selves to have five minutes to explore with your senses the transition of seasons from Winter to Spring. But make sure to stay within eyesight of me at all times and within ear shot so you can hear me call you back to the Lily Shelter with my wolf howl in five minutes. Alright, lets go explore!

I ask that before you depart from your inner child, you think of something that you just found special interest in. Think about how it moves, how it might walk back to the classroom. Was it a large Douglas-fir tree that sways back and fourth in the wind, an eager Squirrel looking for their winter caches, or maybe the water flowing smoothly down Deer Creek? Now as we walk back to the class take on the persona of that organism and walk there as they would, swaying, rumbling, or scurrying into your seats. Follow me!

### **Preschool models and Nature Based Free Play**

How did that feel? Did it bring up any memories or strong reactions? As an adult, it does feel a bit strange being told to just go explore an area without much direction given, or to sing songs and interpret sounds through body movements. These are just a few of the things children do on a daily basis. As a child who is just starting to develop social, emotional, and intellectual thought, I believe that play is an essential part of their

cognitive developments. In *Rethinking Early Childhood Education*, which is a compilation of journal articles, Seth Shteir, an educator from Van Nuys, California lets first and second graders play with blocks as a way to interpret and reflect on experiences they've had on field trips or in class lessons. Seth states that "play can be a purposeful, intellectual activity that is hard work" (Shteir, pp. 65). After one trip to a local butterfly garden, he finds his students attempting to rebuild the cages in which the monarchs and caterpillars were housed. They clearly demonstrated their knowledge of the stages of life of a caterpillar and their understanding of the area they visited by constructing a basic map of the garden grounds through the use of blocks (Shteir, 2008).

This word that Seth uses in this statement, the word work, reminds me of the Montessori philosophy. There are three types of fairly well known philosophies used in preschools in the United States, one of the most popular would be Montessori. These preschools base their design off of the ideas that Maria Montessori had developed when opening that Casa dei Bambini of Children's House for low-income families in Rome during 1907 (Kramer, 1988). This philosophy sees playing games, cleaning up and daily rituals as an opportunity to learn. They prefer to avoid the use of the words 'play' or 'games' and instead, describe all of their activities as work. In essence the children are learning through play, but the idea of work gives a sense of life-time transference of skills for the student. The core components of the Montessori style is to emphasize child-directed work with uninterrupted blocks of time, using specific Montessori materials. These materials can include building blocks, pouring stations, cleaning tools, art tables and other specifically designed elements that meet Montessori standards. Through their work, children learn concepts of assessing progress and correcting their own mistakes, with the end goal of them becoming responsible and independent (History of Montessori Education, 2017).

Another popular philosophy among preschools is the Reggio Emilia approach which also stems from Italy and values the idea of self-guided curriculum. This philosophy was created after World War II by psychologist Loris Malaguzzi. The idea behind Reggio Emilia is to instill respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a creative and enriching environment based on the child's individual pace and their own self-direction (Gandini, 2003).

Lastly, the Waldorf philosophy is another well-known approach to teaching preschool. Again, it follows the similar patterns of the other two philosophies of self-directed exploration and independence. The Waldorf style of preschool was created by Rudolf Steiner in Germany in 1919. It is designed to be developmentally appropriate, experiential, and academically rigorous. Through integration of arts in all academic levels along with a regimented schedule, this philosophy allows children to explore a place in which they feel extremely comfortable and aware (History of Waldorf Education, 2015).

These models are used as an alternative to the public preschool option. Often they are sought out as giving children a more fulfilling learning experience than a public preschool. The Bellingham Public Preschools follow the Kindergarten Readiness Guidelines as a way to benchmark learning. In order to be ready for kindergarten,

according to the Bellingham School District, children should have skills in math and literacy, be able to navigate social and emotional skills (like remembering routines and following two step directions), and know their personal information (like their parents and siblings names, their address and phone number). In essence, they are attempting to normalize students to get ready for their formal schooling years (Kindergarten Readiness Guideliness, N.D). They do this by making them practice and repeat letters, numbers, colors and shapes, usually through typical academic styles of teaching with play seen as the reward at the end of the day. But what are these students really getting normalized to? Is it plastic toys and carpeted floors where they learn to identify cut out paper shapes and learn about letters through worksheets? The public preschool system does not always nurture the child to the same extent in which these other philosophies can accomplish. Yet a large portion of the families of the preschool population can't afford to attend these private preschools.

Now the one approach we have yet to mention is the still developing, Nature Preschool model. Stemming from Friedrich Froebel's concept of Waldkindergarten or translated as Children's Garden, education is seen as being inseparable from the natural environment (Chisholm, 2016). Nature preschools have spread throughout Europe and have come to our shores in the form we are seeing appear throughout the country today. The Natural Start Alliance built by the North American Association for Environmental Education (or NAAEE) states that the main criteria determining a nature preschool are as follows:

- 1) "Nature is the integrating thread that intentionally ties together the preschool's philosophy, methodologies, class-room design, outdoor spaces, and public identity.
- 2) A nature preschool's program is based on high-quality practices of both early childhood education and environmental education, requiring its teaching staff to have skills and experience in both fields.
- 3) A nature preschool program uses the natural world to support dual goals that address both child development and conservation values." (What is a nature preschool?, N.D).

These are very broad criteria for a reason. And we'll revisit them again later in my presentation. But for now, lets go back to the experience we just had in the exercise we did at the beginning of my presentation. Think about some of the things you noticed today that you might not have otherwise payed any attention to if not directed to play.

Exercises like playing in nature as it transforms into spring or imitating a bud bursting open with body movements can spark imagination and creativity within the child, allowing them to explore themselves along with developing a sense of place. This sense of place is a full and continually developing awareness of the environment you call home.

Close your eyes with me and think about your childhood. Think about your earliest memory that takes place outside. Maybe it is a place you visited with your family, maybe it is a section of your old backyard, or maybe it was a place you would find respite away

from your siblings or parents. Imagine the surroundings, what sounds you hear, what the temperature is like, maybe there is a familiar smell you associate with this place. Sit there for a moment. When you're ready, go ahead and open your eyes.

All of those sensual emotions that arise when you are imagining yours special spot, describes your sense of place. The importance of building an understanding of the environment you live in - developing that sense of place - gives direct access and connection to the natural world. Ann Pelo, an early childhood educator and teacher mentor based in Seattle, said it best when describing the responsibility of developing a sense of place within children. It is "to invite children to braid their identities together with the place where they live by calling their attention to the air, the sky, the cracks in the sidewalk where the earth busts out of its cement cage" (Pelo, pp. 124). Where the earth busts out of its cement cage...

Programs that use models that take kids outside for prolonged periods of time allow space for important cognitive abilities to develop. Philosophies stemming from the work of Maria Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Rudolf Steiner include aspects of nature exposure and self-directed play. However, the most prominent and consistent use of natural play and sense of place development is within the budding movement of Nature Preschools.

By developing a sense of place within children from a young age, we are teaching them how to care for an environment. We are in a new era where students are taught to admire travel, moving around, spreading themselves all over the globe to discover the world. This is a great goal, but without having a center, a place of respite and some specific location you call home, there is often a lack of connection to any landscape. A lack of connection to the forest down the street that is about to be logged. Or maybe the stream that flows next to your apartment that is being polluted by a petrochemical plant. These details of destruction may be of worry for a moment, but you may have just accepted a job out of the country and will be moving shortly. With that move those connections to the landscape that you momentarily called home, are severed. I'm not saying this is every person, obviously we have many people here today who have a connection to place and would be devastated to see any negative environmental impacts develop in their home. But this trend of moving and spreading out is becoming more apparent as our education system and our social norms encourage travel but forget to teach about place.

Ecological psychology is based on the understanding that children learn from their direct experiences of the world, mirroring what is happening around them (Chawla, 2012). As Louis Chawla states "in the process children learn what people around them consider worth noticing and how they appraise it, and they find their own spontaneous interests are either encouraged, reprimanded, or ignored" (Chawla, pp. 529). If a child gets reprimanded for playing in the mud, even when the real story that they experienced was how they built up the courage to catch a garter snake, all they might remember is that they should not play in the mud. It is dirty, messy, and is not accepted as appropriate behavior.

Chawla continues by saying “thus a nearby natural area can be a place of fascination that a family explores and appreciates together, a scary place that children are forbidden to enter, or something barely noticed as children ride by in the family car” (Chawla, pp. 529). As adults we often forget to notice the small natural wonders around us to the deficit of the children that we engage with. But its hard when you yourself don’t know the natural history or the seasonal cycles of a place.

One of the easiest ways to start developing the understanding of where you live for adults and for children is to observe changes in the seasons through play. There isn’t a need to know the names right away. Chase shadows, jump in piles of fall leaves or puddles of mud, go ‘fishing’ with sticks in a stream. All of these types of observation play increase a child’s understanding of the area they live in. These memories will be connected to seasons.

Looking at bioluminescent algae in Bellingham Bay and picking fresh salmonberries and blackberries on the way to the park are activities reserved for summer. Playing in large leaf piles or packing snowballs are only possible in the fall and winter. The self-directed play that is so consciously promoted in nature preschools are there to encourage independence and the discovery of place on their own terms.

Child driven learning and exploration is a constant theme throughout nature preschool programming. In the Pacific Northwest and in a continually growing number of places on the East Coast, there is a demand for nature preschools. My focus is going to be on Bellingham in particular as it has been the focus of my research and the basis of my understanding of the preschool system.

I had the opportunity to go into two different preschools. The Madrona School and Wildhood Microschools both consider themselves to be the homes of nature preschools. I also talked to a few preschools in the Bellingham area that valued extended time in nature. The Madrona School which is based on the Reggio Emilia principle but recently added a nature preschool program this past year, have students that have created a continued narrative that takes place on wood chip mountain. The children bounce around in various spots on this wood chip field in an attempt to find the portal that sends them to unicorn island (they haven’t found it quite yet, but I’m sure they’re still jumping around attempting to be transported to that other world). This free exploration gives these children the space to develop creative thought. These kids can tell stories from beginning to end with a competent and easily followed storyline. Have you ever tried coming up with a story on the spot, with no prompts other than what surrounds you? It is pretty difficult as an adult.

In this electronic age, children’s creative development can be stifled by excessive exposure to high intensity stimulation (Olfman, 2005) . Sharna Olfman, a professor of clinical and developmental psychology at Point Park University in Pittsburg states that “the capacities needed to initiate play are undermined by screen culture, and the subsequent loss of playtime undermines these same capacities even futher.” Sharna goes on to say that, “grade school teachers are finding that some of their students don’t

spontaneously visualize the characters they are reading about - and so reading becomes a colossal bore" (Olfman, pp. 61).

Children are not able to image characters in books? I distinctly remember diving into a fantasy world every time I opened the newest Harry Potter book. I wouldn't put it down! I would be walking down the streets, holding my mom's arm and reading. What are children losing in they can't escape into a fantasy world of their own creation?

Now I know there is an argument for fantasy play through video gaming, but the majority of games that kids play have all the components set up for them already. Hair styles, skin colors, body shapes, even personas that are ready to choose from. The only opportunity they would have to create everything from scratch is if they were already fluent in computer programming. In contrast, a book provides the storyline and the reader provides the imaginary lens to create the characters into whatever image they choose. I definitely did not picture Hermoine or Ron to look the way they did in the movies.

Preschools make an effort to eliminate the threat of being invaded by screen time, but nature-based programs take away the possibilities of screens entering into the classroom completely. Without screens available, children are given the space to delve deep into their imagination (Healy, 2008).

When I went and observed at Wildhood, one of the children found a slippery, muddy slope to climb up that he helped teach me how to climb up using various hand and foot holds that he said were "The Best!" Not only was he learning to give directions and feel proud of his accomplishments, but he was creating a storyline within his day of him climbing a great mountain where he needed to help out a friend. He later recounted that story at closing circle as a fun adventure that he had been on that day.

Can similar stories be carried out in a classroom setting? Possibly, but more often, teachers are complaining about how little children are paying attention. The diagnoses of ADD and ADHD get thrown around constantly in regard to lack of concentration in the classroom. Kids act impulsively, have trouble focusing and are hyperactive (Taylor, 2011). Children with these 'disorders' (or as the authors Andrea Taylor and Francis Kuo like to say, inconsistencies) do have different capabilities to concentrate for various amounts of time. But there is well established research that shows the symptoms of concentration don't need to be treated with pills, but can be countered with time outside in a natural setting. These children who have attention inconsistencies can restore the reserves of directed attention by spending time outside in a natural setting as explained in Attention Restoration Theory (Taylor, 2009).

This theory was developed by Stephen Kaplan from the department of psychology at University of Michigan. He uses research from William James in 1892 that speaks about what Kaplan calls, directed attention. This is the type of attention that is given to something because it is expected, not necessarily desired.



For instance, I have experienced this type of directed attention most notably in high school where I would have to be paying attention to the teacher when really, I just wanted to be talking to my friends. I would often come home feeling mentally exhausted and sit right in front of our TV. Kaplan calls this exhaustion, “directed attention fatigue” (Kaplan, 1995). I bet we have a lot of grad students in this room who are experiencing this type of fatigue right now.

When a person has a lower capacity to concentrate, they find that directed attention fatigue comes on faster. It is therefore more difficult to attend to what is seen as important and to make thoughtful decisions about what needs to be done, in some cases causing impulsivity. Kaplan emphasizes the importance of restoring one’s directed attention capacity through engaging in restorative activities. The most simple of restorative activities that we all engage in is sleep. Although often it is not enough to fully restore directed attention capacities. Another way to restore attention capacity is through involuntary attention which is something that isn’t consciously chosen but draws attention naturally, allowing the mind to wander towards it by pure fascination (Kaplan, 1995).

Electronics easily draw fascination through stimulating visuals while following a bird through a forest could also be quite fascinating for some. Though, both of these forms of fascination require effort and can expend some mental energy as well. Kaplan suggests that to restore attention capacities there must be the availability of a mental space where no directed attention is needed. Having an environment that has enough elements to fully engage attention and that fits the goal of what is trying to be accomplished can also have drastic restorative effects (Kaplan, 1995). All of these techniques that Kaplan suggests to restore directed attention capacities can easily take place in a natural setting. Taylor and Kuo conducted comparative research into Kaplan’s definition of Attention Restoration Theory.

Their research subjects were children ages seven to twelve who have been diagnosed with attention deficits. They compared the attention spans of the research subjects when being exposed to three different sites: a neighborhood, a downtown area, and a park setting. They found that the neighborhood and downtown settings were both minimally restorative while the park provided a much larger restorative effect on the children’s concentration abilities (Taylor, 2009; Myers, 2012).

Spending just a small amount of time outside in a natural setting increased children’s capacities for concentration. Further studies that have been conducted show that even in a classroom setting, children with ADHD are able to concentrate longer when having access to a window facing a green space, a view of a terrarium, or an aquarium. Even having a plant inside the classroom has been shown to help children with ADHD to concentrate longer (Taylor, 2011).

Although children are not diagnosed with ADD or ADHD until they’ve reached a certain developmental stage, it is never too early to expose children to nature so they can

experience and understand the restorative effects nature can have on their attention capacities.

So often at Mountain School (a three day experiential learning program in the North Cascades National Park), I would hear feedback from the teachers that describe how well behaved or engaged students who usually aren't in the classroom, were when engaging in Mountain School lessons. I am not going to take all the credit for engaging students that much or having the best grasp on how to manage classroom behavior. I do believe that it stems from the student's ability to not have to engage in directed attention the entire day. Every lesson was separated by periods of hiking, self-exploration, or quiet, meditative periods. They were given the opportunity to restore their attention enough that they could then concentrate on the lesson at hand.

Schools that value outdoor time and the structure of education in nature are popping up all over the place and in many forms. But the essential component of nature preschools and nature programming at the preschool age is that it can provide the building blocks for a healthy adolescence and productive cognitive growth. Bellingham overall, has a number of preschools developing special programs to appeal to the nature preschool model. Alternatively, they're adding in extra time for children to explore in a natural setting in order to meet this desire from parents. Unfortunately there are still many barriers lying in the way of every child being able to benefit from this type of programming.

The first barrier I've identified is the cost associated with nature preschools. Rain, snow or shine, children are outside experiencing nature in all its glory. As you may have experienced during our free play time, it was pretty cold and wet. You may have felt slightly uncomfortable in those tennis shoes you chose to wear today, but maybe that was all you had.

Nature based play requires an extreme amount of gear in order for the children to be comfortable. If they're dressed inappropriately it will only be a matter of time before they start breaking down and not being able to explore, which is essentially the entire point of nature-based play. That means full rain togs, boots, snow pants and jacket, summer hats, sunglasses, wind breakers, all of the above (Sobel, 2016). Oh, but it doesn't stop there for cost. The time and resources required for the parents to wash all of these clothes on a regular basis because they're getting covered in mud and grass stains has to be included as well. The time it takes to care for clothing, mending and patching holes, also plays a huge role in cost association with nature preschools.

Low-income families can rarely afford to attend nature preschools because of these outside costs. Some preschools have been able to find funding or sponsors to provide the appropriate gear needed for children to play outside comfortably, but definitely not all. Even with the gear provided, cost of attendance is still fairly high in comparison to public preschools. Outside training for the teachers to receive their first aid certificates and trainings in natural history education can all add to the cost of a nature preschool program.

Furthermore, many nature preschools reside close to parks or forests and are usually on the outskirts of town or away from urban areas. The family that wants their preschooler to get into nature may have to drive quite a distance to give their child the education they desire.

Picture this, the ideal nature preschool. Children playing in a forest or scenic park that has a mixture of trees draped in moss, open grassy areas, and trails to explore where you can find scat, animal prints, and maybe even a deer rubbing. But how does a preschool located in the center of downtown Bellingham achieve this type of wild experience without having to rent a van and drive to a local park or make their kids walk miles to the nearest park? It usually doesn't. This brings me to my next barrier I've identified, accessibility.

Even a nature preschool surrounded by concrete and tall buildings have natural elements present. There have been challenges to this concept that a nature preschool needs a forest or a large park to explore (Pelo, 2008).

Some educators in a non-nature preschool setting have decided to take extended walks around the neighborhoods that surround their school, taking notice of birds flying overhead, cracks in the sidewalk where moss is pushing through, or someone's beautifully landscaped front lawn (Derr, 2016; Pelo, 2008). This type of exploration gives the children a chance to learn about human influenced settings, native and non-native species of plants, and even insects. Bugs are everywhere! There is a learning opportunity even in the rocks. Students can point out the differences between human created materials and rocks that have appeared from the bedrock below. There is always a place to explore plants, animals, and nature (Russ, 2015).

But what if teachers themselves don't notice the differences in the types of rocks or know where to look for the most interesting bugs? Unfortunately, our next barrier that I've identified is the teacher. There are very few higher education programs that include outdoor experiences as part of their essential curriculum. Teachers are not taught how to manage classrooms outside and they're not taught the benefits of outdoor play away from human built structures. Many of these teachers are not educated themselves on the natural history of their place (Louv, 2008). How are they expected to teach their students about nature? Who has the time anymore when you have to teach these preschoolers how to read and write in order to get them ready to go into kindergarten. My impression of preschool has always been a place where children learn how to interact socially and physically with their surroundings, begin to develop their cognitive abilities to complete tasks, start to understand what numbers and letters are, but not have to read and write by the end of it. Kids are constantly being pushed in our society to learn more and learn it faster. We have a culture in Western society to get things done as efficiently as possible.

The No Child Left Behind Act that was put in place under the Bush administration increased the use of adequate yearly progress reports, which basically boxes us up into success stages that register you as a passing or failing student (The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2010). Can a four year old really fail at something? They're just

starting to discover themselves. We shouldn't be judging their progress, but nurturing their development throughout any stages they experience. Peter Campbell a parent, educator, and activist in Portland, Oregon exposes this conundrum, by saying "how odd that a policy called 'No Child Left Behind' can define children as 'behind' on their very first day of school." (Campbell, pp. 59). This is in reference to Peter's child being tested on the first day of prekindergarten where she was asked to write her name. Now Peter's child didn't know how to write her name and she became distressed and felt inadequate when unable to complete the task. Through Peter's observations of the teacher who was submitting this test, she did not seem impressed either (Campbell, 2008).

With these types of benchmarks guiding teacher's assessment of children, it is no wonder schools believe that spending time outside is non-essential. Teachers are not getting trained in its value. The goals that teachers have to work towards are mandated by the state and don't even allow them the time to explore the option of holding class outside for the full day. Children are too busy writing and re-writing before they even know how to tell their own story. Now as we see a growth in demand for time out in nature from parents like Peter Campbell and many networks of families around Bellingham, we're starting to see these teachers who come from backgrounds in Montessori and Waldorf try to navigate a completely different environment by using practices that don't easily transfer over to an outdoor classroom. One example that I witnessed is when I went to observe the Wildhood program in Bellingham.

This is a full fledged nature preschool where only in the winter do they spend minutes inside putting on appropriate gear and waiting for their parents at the end of the day. The day I visited, it was a typical winter day for Bellingham, fairly windy and pretty chilly. This is how the story goes:

We get to Fairhaven park, a large expansive field with a small stream running through the side and lots of natural features to enjoy. Snack time is coming up. The lead teacher decides its best not to sit under their normal tree as she sees a branch starting to come loose, but chooses a rhododendron grove instead. Still very windy, but the risk level was much lower in this grove. The teacher then began setting out an elaborate place setting including reusable plastic plates, bowls and spoons with the child's water bottle at each station in a little circle. But since it was extremely windy this day, things started to fly away immediately, even before the children could take their seats. So we're running around, grabbing plates and plastic bags that are flying away and re-stacking them. Finally, after getting settled in, hands on everything, the distribution of food begins. Two cheese cubes, two bread sticks and a small bowl of soup carried in an extremely large flask. They graciously gave me a serving of each as well. When I went to go take a spoonful of soup to my mouth though, the wind carried the soup out of my spoon and onto the face of the child directly to my left. We laughed about it and decided to drink from our bowls instead, but the entire scene was like it had come out of some sad, corny comedy with no punch line.

Snack was way more of a struggle than it needed to be. But it was very reminiscent of Montessori snack times. Having your designated spot, taking the appropriate amount of

food, finishing your serving and waiting till everyone had a chance to eat before asking for seconds.

Contrasting this scenario with the nature preschool program at the Madrona School, their snack time went a lot smoother. They have an instructor that has twenty years experience in nature programming for youth while the instructors at Wildhood were both fairly young and did not have a direct background in environmental education. We had similar conditions to the day at Wildhood, but the instructor knew the park and where there was a definite wind block in a large grove of bushes right next to a stream. She pulled out small, used applesauce cups and filled them with goldfish and cranberries as the snack. Play was allowed to happen in the area during snack time, but you had to make sure to stay close so you could hear the story of Timothy the flying squirrel getting into trouble with its shadow.

This anecdote in its simplest details shows the difference a teacher's education can make on the way they approach nature based programming. Many of these skills can be learned through trial and error, but what if our teachers were already versed in nature based play and outdoor classrooms?

Imagine how much more of a smooth transition it would be if they already knew what worked and what didn't. The nature preschool model could possibly become more credible and more accessible to teachers and parents. But not all parents know about the benefits underlying nature preschool. Not all parents are willing to dedicate their entire paycheck to this form of education they might not understand as valuable. Not all families even have nature preschools as an available option. Which brings me to my next barrier nature preschools face, the stereotype.

There is an overwhelming stereotype of nature preschools that it is a program only for white, rich kids. This stereotype is not only present in nature preschools, but also in the National Park system and outdoor recreation in general. Although the National Parks have been working extremely hard to change this narrative of the lack of diversity present, nature preschools haven't quite shed themselves of this stereotype just yet.

Lack of diversity in classrooms is also a common trend for many private preschools. Now, as a parent, what would you want for your child just entering their first structured learning experience? Would you want your child to feel safe, welcome and included? Would you want them to be able to interact with children that they can relate to?

If you are a person of color in Bellingham and you look at the current offerings of nature preschools and see the children and the teachers that populate these schools, you would see a lot of white faces, a lot of able bodied kids, and some unconscious use of exclusive language. This is obviously not true in every case as there are many inner city urban nature preschools that provide excellent inclusive education that serve a diverse population of students (Derr, 2016). But this isn't readily the norm in which nature preschools are developed.

Now, going back to the NAAEE's guiding principles for nature preschools, there isn't a single point that says nature preschools should be inclusive or appeal to diverse audiences. There isn't even a point about the design having to be relevant or accessible to the community it is located in. So no wonder they tend to serve the privileged. Nature preschools cannot be a perfectly formed model that can be dropped anywhere (Sobel, 2016). They work best when tailor made to the environment and the community they are placed in. So why can't we meld all of the great things coming out of these different philosophies to give a flexible model that will best fit the needs and interests of the communities at hand? We should allow our budding students to be the best they can be by teaching them about their environment, their community, themselves, and how to be inclusive and aware (Fraser, 2015).

Nature preschools provide the perfect platform to integrate and interpret all of these philosophies of early childhood education because it is still in the developmental phase. There is still an opportunity to include topics of equity, inclusion and social justice in the guiding principles of nature preschools. I see a perfect opening within the way we teach about nature, specifically within the stories we tell about birds.

Think about the way nature is interpreted through zoos, animal programming, and stories in books. These story lines often reaffirm the heteronormative structure. Animals pair up in male and female, monogamous couplings to make babies. The female becomes the main or independent caretaker for the offspring while the male, if present, hunts for food. What is often forgotten and seen most easily in the life of birds in particular, is that this dynamic is much more complex than what society seems to want to teach us.

Lets start with plumage, the feathering of birds. More often than not, the males have dramatic colored feathers while the females are usually brown or quite 'drab' looking. For example, the Mallard, which is the duck you see in ponds across the US, has a dazzling green iridescent head. This is the coloring of a fantastic male. The female on the other hand, is that boring brown thing next to it. This coloring is present because it is the male's role to attract the female. Not the other way around as society often wants us to think through our own social interactions. The male is responsible for courting the female with his amazing display of feathering and posturing. Have you ever seen a video of the birds of paradise prancing around trying to attract the female? This is pretty much the same across the board for bird species, maybe not as grand, but you get the point.

Birds also don't necessarily stick to the male/female coupling. Ravens are occasionally seen grouping into threes (male/female mixtures), to take care of offspring. Many birds, like the Peregrine Falcon, take joint responsibility in caring for their young. In the case of the Spotted Sandpiper, the male is the main caretaker of incubation of eggs while the female is actually off copulating with more males, engaging in what is called polyandry. Am I breaking through anyone's heteronormative stereotypes just yet?

The amazing thing is that even at these nature preschools, this narrative of mommies and daddies making babies and caring for their young together, is still so strongly rooted

in the stories that are being read and the lessons of biology that are being taught at a young age.

It is time to take back the narrative and move away from the heteronormative binary of sexual orientation. Furthermore, we can include topics of racial, cultural differences, and abilities through the use of a natural setting. A common technique that some preschools currently employ to discuss these topics is the art of storytelling, which is already an activity so present in preschools already.

Through the book *Rethinking Early Childhood Education*, author Trisha Whitney proposes the idea of using *Kids Like Us* dolls which are usually hand-made and used in a very particular way. They are not to be played with outside of the guided conversations with the teacher. These are dolls that depict children of all ethnicities, cultures, and abilities. They are to be used in a way that allow children to interpret and reflect upon biases that they have either shown in the classroom or could experience in their daily lives. These dolls are especially useful in all white classrooms that may only experience diversity at a young age in this way (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Whitney, 2008). One concept that will easily integrate this method into the nature preschool model is to add on an animal character that can act as a narrator for the children to use. The Madrona School in Bellingham often uses their school mascot which is Timothy, the flying squirrel puppet, as the center of their stories and games.

The animal character allows the children to give Timothy a voice to respond to the disabled doll that just told a story about how he was made fun of and excluded from a game on the playground because he is in a wheelchair. Teachers can use these stories as a way to interpret how acting in a biased way can be hurtful and unfair, most importantly, something that they never want to inflict upon someone or experience themselves. Through effective and planned questioning by the instructor, students are able to brainstorm strategies on how to deal with the situation and manage their own feelings either as an outsider listening in or the active participant within the storyline.

Walking the aisles in a toy store, you won't find *Kids Like Us* dolls, which is why they're usually hand made. Instead you will be bombarded with a hoard of media messaging and will have to decide whether you are shopping for a boy, a girl, or a baby. Boys have cars, a battalion of action figures, and flashy blue and black packaging lining the shelves while the girl aisle is overwhelmingly pink and yellow, filled with dolls, houses, care taking toys, and dress up clothing. Not only are they separated on this boy/girl binary, but the faces of the dolls are overwhelmingly white and able-bodies. Only when they are depicting aliens or characters from a movie will they possibly be of a different race (Hofmann, 2008). The nature preschool setting dissolves any need for toys other than the very thought out, directed dolls that provide further learning. Instead, children only have what is available in nature to build with, play with, and manipulate. There is no deciding whether a stick is for a boy or a girl to play with. They might approach their type of play in a different way, but the tool is not limited to one gender only. By not having toys that accommodate the gender binary, children are able to explore their interests without hesitation (Hofmann, 2008). More crossover in typical female or

male roles will be able to happen without judgement and creativity can flourish as none of these 'toys' have specific or directed ways of being used.

Racism, classism, sexism, ableism... These are all still present issues in our world. We are not teaching our children how to openly accept each other, but are teaching them that it is rude to point out each others differences, to ask about family struggles, to see how the poorer or the disadvantaged live. I remember in my childhood when I grew up in Jakarta, Indonesia, I was able to see comfortably white Americans can live, turning their eyes away from the struggles of others. In Jakarta, we lived in an expat compound that had guards at the front gates, checking cars, asking what house you were going to, and what your name was. People who did not live there or did not have any business being in this compound were not allowed to see what was beyond those gates. Just beyond though, literally on the other side of these massive walls was an expansive Kampung, a village or community that housed the countless numbers of impoverished people that live in Jakarta. Not only was the Kampung present around my home, but my friends' homes and my school. The funny thing was though, I had never set foot into a Kampung unless we were traveling indirectly on the outskirts as a means to get to whatever site our intentions were truly set on, but it was always seen as an inconvenience. I was socially discouraged from entering and witnessing first hand, the hardships that people literally right next door to me, faced on a daily basis. Oh, but we did have a Kampung club whose intentions were set on helping the needy, which none of us actually knew or had any experience with first hand. But this is what I'm talking about! We hide from the reality of the communities that surround us as a way to comfortably live our own lives out as best we can. It is time to break down those walls and start asking the tough questions that make only ourselves feel uncomfortable. It is time to see every skin color, every body type, every age, every everything represented in our schools, in our national parks, in our housing communities, and in our media.

Topics of social justice, equity, and inclusion are important to include at a young age. If we grow up knowing how to appreciate each other's differences rather than shy away from them, we many not have as many biases to break through and challenge in college. We will be able to understand early on the way in which social justice issues and environmental issues are completely entwined. The kid that can't afford the proper shoes to wear outside or a raincoat to keep them dry, most likely won't be encouraged to play outside for extended periods of time, barring them from the ability to develop a sense of place. The child with a mobile disability may have the opportunity to be out in nature, but because of low expectations from the caretakers or classmates, won't be encouraged to try to freely explore a natural environment as fear of the unknown sets in.

Inclusion, equity, social justice. We should be introducing topics of anti-bias education into our preschools to braid it into the growing desire for outdoor education. I believe that by doing this, we will be arming our children with the emotional and physical capacities to deal with the world they are inheriting.



Inclusion, equity, social justice. We need to talk to our children about why they should love everyone. Why they should love all the differences and all the similarities that bring us together as the common person.

Inclusion, equity, social justice. Let's help pave the way for the next generation to be better than ours by cherishing our knowledge of place, embracing our communities and sharing all of the good and the not so good with our children.



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