

WONDER

The Nature Action Collaborative for Children Global Newsletter

Coordinated by Kirsten Haugen

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Place-Based Learning: Challenges Point the Way to Growth

“It is the struggle during the storm that helps a young tree develop resilience. And so it is with human beings, for we are a part of nature.”

– Nancy Rosenow

“We believe that regular connections with nature encourage children to develop respect for local cultures and climates, and for themselves as a part of nature.”

—NACC’s *Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature*, worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up

Most of us, as caring, caregiving humans, feel a deep urge to protect children from harm, and to give all children a universal chance to learn and grow. Unchallenged, protection easily slips into overprotection and universal opportunities become confused with uniform approaches. The pandemic has indeed ripped many of us from our comfort zones. Yes, we are tired. And yes, we have risen up, sometimes repeatedly. Along the way, many of us have discovered or rediscovered or affirmed a more responsive form of education: growth happens when children participate in addressing challenges rather than being overly shielded from them. And when learning relies on local circumstances and resources, we recognize that quality is more dependent on caring, intention, and respect than on controlled content or materials.

At the core of this resilience and flexibility, we find nature as our guide. As both Sobel and Cininta demonstrate, whether we are in blustery New England or tropical Java, when we take learning outdoors, we discover multiple ways to turn challenges—like the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns—into opportunities for learning and growth. Working with what nature has to offer, we take a challenging and delightful journey to face down fears and struggles through imagination, trial and error, and a growing connection to our immediate community and environment. Sobel documents how this is happening again and again throughout New England. Cininta, applying her dual role as a HighScope educator and mother of twins, reminds us, “In place-based learning, rather than prepare children to solve problems of the future, we prepare them to solve today’s problems; they can make a difference here and now, and develop awareness and empathy to create mindful, innovative solutions to solve global issues.”

With gratitude,



Kirsten Haugen

This is the second in a two-part series on place-based learning with nature.



Nature Action Collaborative for Children

The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC) is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world’s children.

worldforumfoundation.org/nature

Write for WONDER!

Send your “Wonder-filled” story about connecting children with the natural world to kirstenh@dimensionsfoundation.org

Finding the Good in the Pandemic

by David Sobel, United States (davidsobelauthor.com)

Eleanor Porter, the New Hampshire-born author who created the cheery storybook character Pollyanna, resisted the criticism of her character as having blind optimism. Instead, Porter insisted, “Pollyanna was positively determined to find the good in every situation.”

In that spirit, I want to suggest that the pandemic has shed new light on the virtue of educating young children outdoors. Prior to the pandemic, nature preschools, forest kindergartens and place-based elementary education programs were all playing bit parts in the big play of education in North America. Now, the spotlight is focused on how education outdoors might be the best thing since sliced bread.

In the early stages of the pandemic, it became clear that transmission of the virus in closed, indoor spaces was much more likely than outside in the open air. Indoor ventilation systems facilitated exposure to the virus, outdoor spaciousness facilitated dispersal of the virus, and allowed children to socially distance. In the summer of 2020, at the height of the pandemic, many elementary schools across New England realized that one solution to keeping schools open during the 2020-21 school year was to move classrooms outside as much as possible. This would preserve equal access for all children, rather than just the children with technology and a good internet connection. Educating outside was one part of the solution to the diversity, equity and inclusivity challenges of the pandemic.

The South Portland, Maine, district constructed 90 outdoor learning spaces for their eight schools. The Portland, Maine, district ordered 500 pairs of gloves, 1,000 hats and 600 pairs of snow pants, to ensure that all students would have access to appropriate gear to make them comfortable outside. The commitment was to conduct as much of the regular school day outside as possible, through the challenges of winter weather. Some teachers jumped at the opportunity. Many were apprehensive. How am I going to maintain classroom management practices? What am I going to do with them out there?

Most teachers, parents and administrators were surprised by how much the children loved school outdoors, and were further surprised by the academic results. Teachers realized that managing behavior was often easier outdoors than indoors. First grade teacher Cindy Hanson commented that after outdoor play breaks between outdoor academic lessons, “When I call them back, they come right back ready to

work. People were worried they would be distracted by what is around them, and that has been our biggest surprise.”

Teachers realized that outdoor learning was particularly beneficial for challenged learners. Fourth grade teacher Sue Laskowsky commented, “All the things that maybe bring them down—whether it is that they are not up to a level academically—when they are outside, those kids are the most helpful kids; they are the hardest working kids; and all of a sudden everyone is on equal footing.” The big takeaway for the teachers and principal in Deerfield was that, “Most students, it turns out, are just as focused and less anxious learning math among hemlock trees than they are indoors.”

The response was similar for younger children at the Henry Frost Children’s Program in Belmont, Massachusetts. Teacher Iris Ponte said, “As a preschool educator, I used to think 30 degrees was cold. Not anymore. Our school has opened in 17 degrees, multiple times. We have learned to layer, eat warm foods in Thermoses, and keep moving. I was not trained to be an outdoor educator, but I have learned to embrace it. In fact, I do not think I will ever be able to work with children again without prioritizing the outdoors.”

Ponte discovered what teachers at more than 500 nature preschools had been advocating for before the pandemic: early childhood education outdoors makes children healthier, happier and smarter. Ponte describes, “The children have adapted and adjusted in ways we could never have imagined. They cheer when we have ice rain, and they cannot wait to see how the snow transforms our play spaces. Our curriculum has taken on a whole new dimension, as we



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The children have adapted and adjusted...They cheer when we have ice rain...they cannot wait to see how the snow transforms our play spaces.

push away the boundaries of our school walls and play yard fence, and explore beyond. We have learned that weather is to be embraced, the seasons to be understood, and for the first time in my life, I have been teaching young children completely outdoors for five hours a day. The neighborhood becomes the classroom, the children develop all the requisite literacy and math skills, and they are healthier and stronger because they are walking miles a day.”

Over 1,000 schools moved to outdoor learning in New York City during the pandemic. Many had to resort to using blocked off streets and asphalt lots. At PS 184 in Manhattan’s Chinatown, teachers and students were able to take advantage of a Trust for Public Lands redesigned schoolyard where trees, gardens, a turf field, and a yoga circle had been installed. The school moved gym, art, English classes, and afterschool programming into the naturalized yard. Isaac Nadich, a sixth grade student, described the benefits of pandemic-inspired outdoor learning.

“You don’t have to use a smart board and look at a screen all day,” he said. “Outside you can use real references—like I’m drawing that tree over there. And it’s nice to bond with your classmates outside.” Imagine that: studying real things, rather than digital images of things. Maybe, as Pollyanna would have it, there is some good to come out of this horrific pandemic.

Similar to public schools in Maine and New Hampshire, many Vermont public school districts constructed several fully functional outdoor classrooms. Most teachers spend a chunk of their teaching time outdoors, even in mid-winter snow and cold. Amy Bogardus, the health and physical education teacher in Tunbridge, Vermont, has stuck by her first day of school pledge to teach from her outdoor classroom every single day of the year.

“It has been pretty amazing— it has challenged me to think outside the box and look at skills in a different way,” she said, explaining that her series of projects using cutting tools to complete some in-class building tasks has helped forge a different relationship with her students. “I probably will never be what I think of as a traditional P.E. teacher anymore.”

Michael Livingstone, the Tunbridge School Principal, has the same plans for how his school will be permanently changed. He hopes to explore the implementation of a permanent outdoor learning component at the school, integrating the school with the community, using local outdoorspeople, healthcare practitioners, musicians and artists as guest educators.



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“I would like to see this develop as a program and not be something that fades into the twilight as things improve,” Livingstone said.

As my mother used to say, “From his lips to God’s ears.” Let’s hope that the new normal in public education in North America includes a healthy dose of learning outside.

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Take Wisdom: Learning Directly from Nature During Pandemics

by Citra Cininta, Jakarta, Indonesia (www.highscope.or.id)

I would like to share our learning journey. It starts from questions that our twin boys brought up during the first pandemic lockdown in Indonesia: “We cannot go out to the market to buy food? We have only guava, devil chilies, and mulberry in our garden! We are gonna starve to death, it is gonna be our apocalypse!” (This is the way 5-year-olds with too much exposure to zombies exaggerate things!) And, critically for Indonesians who typically eat rice with every meal, “What happens to us when we run out of rice?”

From their curiosity, we started our long discussion and research on other food sources, especially with different carbohydrate sources locally grown in Indonesia. Their enthusiasm narrowed to cassava—we called it singkong. Cassava has long been admonished as an inferior food crop or as “poor people’s food” (Napitupulu 1968). The increasing consumption of the tuber after 1900 is still inter-

preted as an indication of the declining standard of living in Indonesia (Booth 1988). I took this “ah-ha!” moment as our starting point, to remind ourselves that our ancestors saw nature as mother, and asked us to respect her. At some point in history, we forgot ancient wisdom. When pandemics and unusual weather phenomena are becoming the norm, it is time to pause and wonder where we lost the way, and how we can still make a comeback.

This is an opportunity to foster engagement in place-based education by leveraging local natural settings and cultural assets to foster an environment that is built on, and develops, children’s interests. Doing so increases the relevancy of learning for children and fosters stronger relationships between family (first educator) and the local community, by encouraging conversations and projects—and ultimately curriculum experiences—with community members.

As a HighScope educator teaching my own children at home, I introduced the HighScope learning process centerpiece: Making Good Choices (MGC). In this case, based on children’s interests, fear of the apocalypse!—they develop conscious planning, thoughtful learning, and reflection for future improvement of the plan. As they speak of their intentions and reflect on their actions, it makes them realize that they can think, make decisions, and solve problems, which promotes self-confidence and independence.

The emphasis is not on the product of their activities, but on building 21st-century skills, including making conscious plans, organizing, taking action, and reflecting. By constantly practicing Making Good Choices (MGC), they create a pattern in the brain. Every time they are faced with a problem or intention, they will get used to thinking in these three steps: conscious planning, thoughtful learning, and reflection for future improvement.

In place-based learning, rather than preparing children to solve problems of the future, we prepare them to solve today’s problems; they can make a difference here and now, and develop awareness and empathy to create mindful, innovative solutions to solve global issues. According to David Sobel (*Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*, 2013), this locally applied approach leads to three new directions:

#1. Sustainability. We can sustain a program without expensive/excessive resources.

#2. From Local to Global. We can act locally and impact globally with a progression in learning from here and now, close and familiar, to future and distant. There is a sensitive



We planned and documented the cassava’s growth.

period during elementary years when children are predisposed to bond with the natural world.

#3. From a mandated monoculture curriculum (same for all students no matter where you live) to curriculum-speciation as a school district goal. An education that teaches about the world around us is superior to a standardized, generic education.

Back to my twins' fears: the increasing consumption of rice since the 1960s is widely regarded as an indication of a turning tide in Indonesia's living standards. Indonesians today often see rice. However, far less is known about the reasons why farmers took up growing cassava in Java and the reasons why cassava consumption increased so rapidly in Indonesia, to the extent that cassava products formed a major part of the staple diet, even today. Cassava, a starchy root vegetable, is a calorie-rich, affordable source of carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. People prepare and eat cassava in various ways (steam, boiling, fermented, frying, chips, tapioca flour, syrup, gluten-free baked goods) and cassava leaves are a source of protein.

Long story short: we have grown a small cassava garden bed in our housing complex during the pandemic. Our neighbors and community join us in taking care of the cassava, we can harvest the leaves and we are looking forward to our cassava community harvest day. The opportunities for integrated place-based projects are limitless.

Place-based learning like this can create so many positive learning experiences outdoors, and in our own communities, as we help children apply their ideas. Children are immersed in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences, and use these interests as a foundation for the study of language arts in English and Bahasa Indonesia, our national language; mathematics including measurement and classifying; social studies, scientific thinking, and other subjects across the curriculum. Children learn from the concrete to the abstract, and what is more tangible than their immediate surroundings, including the food they eat? Time in nature allows for a sensory-rich experience without creating sensory overload, and offers many challenges that cannot be duplicated within four walls.



We learned to frequently moisten the soil with homemade liquid compost, a suitable and sustainable fertilizer.



Few lessons offer such a tasty reward: we really enjoyed the steamed and fried cassava!

Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature

Would you like to explore and share NACC's "Universal Principles for Connecting Children with Nature?" This colorful guide is easily pulled from the center of the January/February 2021 issue of *Exchange*, or you can download it for free at worldforumfoundation.org/nacc-up.

