

RESEARCH

The Arts and Sustainability: Econnection in Early Childhood

by Kumara Ward

Creative arts have long been used for making meaning and conveying knowledge. Music, dance, painting, and storytelling are art forms that have the power to connect us to each other. This research investigates using the arts to connect us to the planet as well. I refer to this relationship as *Econnection*. Originally published as “Creative Arts-based Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (EfS): Challenges and Possibilities” (Ward, 2013) the central research question was: In what ways can self-generated creative arts experiences assist early childhood educators to support young children to learn about the environment?

The most significant finding of my research was that the arts are an important, multi-faceted lens through which to investigate, interpret, and understand the natural world. I studied how using arts experiences (and various media) as tools can help children focus on the natural world. Teachers were encouraged to use their local nature as the subject of investigation and the content for creative expression. This was a process that was new for most of the educators involved in the project. They all came in proficient in conducting arts experiences for young children, but it was new to fuel those experiences with content from their place, as reflected by their local environment.



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My research involved educators in investigating the plant and animal/insect species and the weather phenomena and landscape in their local areas through a natural science inquiry approach. Teachers engaged in opportunities for looking at the ways in which all of the elements in nature coexist as part of an integrated system that can be described through an ecological narrative (story).

Why is this important? It empowered teachers to enhance their own environmental knowledge using techniques with which they were already familiar. The educators became storytellers, focusing on these relationships in their immediate environments. They developed narrative adventures with key characters that exemplified engagement in habitat, lifecycles, social dynamics, and other relationships that denoted place. From these place narratives came creative representations of key elements of the stories, expressed through music, movement, drama, and visual arts.

Combining ecological storytelling with arts experiences helps our relationship with the components of the natural world to crystalize into an understanding of interconnected materials and living systems. My research shows that the well-known benefits of learning through the arts are enhanced further when arts media are used as a means of expression for place stories and scenarios that provide children with experiences of the animal, plant, and insect life of the area in which they live. When children move like an eagle soaring on ever-widening heat thermals, or create in clay the subterranean home of the wombat, they begin to look around them and see the diversity of wildlife and habitat. They develop connected understandings about where and how these creatures coexist and their own footprint on the earth. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, poet, playwright, and scientist says: “Every object, well contemplated, opens up a new organ of percep-

tion within us.” This type of storytelling and expression of its content through the arts puts the ecological heart and soul into sustainability education, rendering it more likely that we will perceive humans as one species among many. Indeed, it is only when we recognize ourselves as part of nature, in a state of econnection, that we know the need for genuine coexistence.

As educators in this research project began to investigate and render the factual information about their local environments into stories, there were challenges. Initially they found themselves telling stories that were somewhat stilted and full of facts. While the facts were important, the stories needed life to make them engaging. When the educators began to name their characters, to imagine what it might feel like to move like the animal or insect in question (and indeed to do so), or to imagine carrying ten times their own weight (think ants), or to paint the magic of waves crashing on the shore, they knew how to infuse their stories with life. Creative arts experiences provided the link between fact and feeling/knowing/empathizing and gave them a strong sense of connection and belonging — a sense of *econnection*.

As stories became a ritual part of daily routines, the children expressed their interest in the plot, the characters, and the settings. They noticed elements of these stories and associated their arts experiences both on outings with their educators (the frequency of outside visits to green spaces increased during the course of this research), as well as on the way

home and on weekends and with their families. Families began to purposefully take their children out into the story settings — national parks, local reserves — and the children came back to preschool with their own stories. This ongoing cycle of place knowledge/experience and arts-imbued experiences fueled more stories co-created by teachers, parents, and children. The children began calling them ‘their stories’ — as they recognized that these narratives belonged to them and their place.

Creative arts, including storytelling, can help connect us to the planet in a most significant manner. What then, if we were to intentionally engage in investigation of place through a mindful process of story and arts in other curriculum areas? What effect might this approach have for restoring the often exhausted directed attention of children with behavioral challenges or learning disabilities? Might it be possible to engage in mathematical concepts of pattern, proportion, size, shape, and form through experiences in the natural world followed and reinforced by story and arts? Might natural sciences and ecology be effectively taught through primary investigation, story and arts where new organs of perception are developed through this type of contemplation? These are the questions that arise and call for further investigation.

To Read the Full Article:

Ward, K. S. (2013). Creative Arts-based Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (EfS): Challenges and Possibilities. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 29, 165–181, doi:10.1017/aee.2014.4.

PRACTICE

Activating the Connection between the Arts and Sustainability

by Michelle Rupiper

Teacher Educators

Kumara Ward’s article provides important insights for enriching and extending outdoor sensory experiences using arts-based techniques such as story, dance, drama, and song. Having students read the article would be a good first step, but this article illustrates the importance of experiential learning. Modeling experiential learning at the college



Dr. Michelle Rupiper has worked with students of all ages, from infancy through college. She feels passionately that young children deserve well-prepared, competent teachers who understand how children learn and are equipped to meet their needs. She works to support teachers through her teaching, writing, and workshop presentations.