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Making ‘place’ for ecological sustainability in early childhood education

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Culturally, childhood is often understood as a time of innocence which can mean that issues such as ecological sustainability are considered too problematic for early childhood practice. By drawing on findings from a research project that focused on issues of ecological sustainability in early childhood centres in New Zealand from Western and indigenous perspectives, this article contributes a critical perspective of ecological sustainability as an educational issue in early childhood education (ECE). The article falls into two parts: the first section gives an overview of some of the conceptual and theoretical issues that underpin critical perspectives of childhood, and provides a context for current global ECE discourse, while the second section introduces the research project and discusses the intersections of ‘local’ and ‘global’ in light of teachers’ emerging ‘pedagogies of place’. The intent is to demonstrate that critical engagement with such complex global issues as ecological sustainability generates spaces for new understandings of how ECE can contribute to theory and practice of education for sustainability.

Keywords: early childhood; pedagogies of place; sociology of childhood; global/local; indigenous knowledge

Introduction: childhood as a discursive construct

Since the Enlightenment, young children and nature have been discursively entangled. From Rousseau’s notion of nature as the ultimate source of human potential (Baker 2001, 20), and Fröbel’s pedagogy of natural unfolding (May 2006), to more contemporary theories of child development (Burman 1994), the child has embodied pure, natural human potential (Castaneda 2002). In education, nothing sums up this deeply enmeshed conceptual relationship better than the word ‘kindergarten’. The romantic image of a garden where innocent children can grow and develop according to nature’s blueprint continues to shape Western early childhood education philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy (Brosterman 1997). Possibly due to this romantic legacy, early childhood education (ECE) has largely shied away from *critical* engagement with the child/nature intersection and its implications for education for sustainability (Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga 2008).

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The importance of engaging young children in environmental learning has been recognised as a key element in cultivating a potentially life-long disposition of care for the environment (Hacking and Barratt 2007). ECE is a significant site where such a disposition can be fostered as early as possible in a child's life. It is perplexing, then, to consider that the persistence and strength of the historical trajectory that links 'the child' to 'nature' may have contributed to 'a research hole' around critical analysis of discourses of sustainability and environmental issues in ECE (Davis 2009, 227). A contributing factor could be that ECE has been deeply shaped by wider social and cultural understandings of the child as vulnerable and innocent (Kincaid 1992). The idea of childhood as a time of innocence that should be kept free of complex knowledges (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994) poses a formidable challenge for educators when it comes to developing pedagogies and curricula that address contestable issues, such as climate change, as an early childhood focus.

Historically, early childhood teachers' work has been considered as complementary to motherhood (Hauser et al. 1998). Early childhood teachers who intend to engage critically with complex issues have to examine not only their understandings of childhood, but also consider the lingering discourse of maternalism that continues to influence how teaching young children is conceptualised and practised (Ailwood 2008). Maternalism, theorised by Ailwood as the cultural aspect of motherhood, complements childhood innocence by positioning the adult in a protective and supportive role reinforcing the notion that ECE should steer away from complex, and, in the case of ecological sustainability, potentially political issues. These discourses position the child as a malleable resource who carries adults' hopes and desires for a better future (Holland 2004). For teachers this often means shielding children from 'harsh realities' to guard their culturally enshrined innocence (Ashenden 2002).

The power of the Western discourse of childhood innocence is evident in the image of the over-protected child who experiences a childhood structured by parents' yearning to guard her or him from the perceived problems of the outside world. This is particularly relevant for middle-class constructions of childhood which lead to the desire to create 'special' places for these 'bubble-wrapped' children (Malone 2007). Early childhood centres and kindergartens are often prime sites where the discourses of protection, vulnerability and innocence create a highly controlled and closely monitored environment through policy, pedagogy and daily practices (Osgood 2006). Anxious parents and their over-protected children are immersed in what has been termed a 'culture of fear' (Furedi 2002). Furedi goes as far as to argue that 'since the 1980s the belief that youngsters are inherently vulnerable and "at risk" has acquired the character of a cultural dogma' (26). Special places for children are largely inside spaces, where the adult gaze monitors potential dangers to provide a 'risk-free' environment for the young child. Potential risks need to be managed not only in the physical but also in the emotional, social, cultural, including 'virtual', and mental realm (Bansel et al. 2009). Teaching young children in a context that overemphasises risk creates the teacher-as-subject who is governed by a 'swirl of surveillance, caution, anxiety and rules' (Jones 2003, 235). For teachers, this often means risk-avoidance in their practice which can lead to resistance when it comes to addressing potentially challenging, complex topics (Elliott and Davis 2009).

In risk culture, childhood is constituted as a domain that requires constant vigilance and surveillance (Rose 1999). Adults, whose perceptions of childhood are

embedded in a culture of fear, are unlikely to be supportive of the concept of the young child as producer of complex meanings (Christensen 2004). While dominant understandings of childhood reproduce childhood as an intensely governed domain where power relations between children and adults remain unexamined (Cannella and Viruru 2004), it is the latter concept of childhood that disrupts the notion of the naturally unfolding, at-risk child. A pedagogy that challenges dominant understandings of childhood requires teachers who are able to work with complexity, uncertainty, risk and imagination (Garrard 2010). In a risk-averse profession, this is an enormous challenge.

Learning to care for all life on earth, when topics like climate change emphasise the urgency of engagement at all levels (Chawla and Cushing 2007), inevitably introduces 'reality' into the protected space of childhood. Paradoxically, children, as (future) citizens, will have to be able to live in economic, natural, cultural, social and political environments that are increasingly unpredictable and unstable (Irwin 2010). Fostering ethics of care requires that adults challenge dominant constructs of childhood by enabling children to participate and contribute to the issues that affect their lives now, and in the future. Early childhood teachers who take the call for engagement seriously take on a leadership role (Duhn 2010b): in an increasingly global context, childhood continues to remain a largely unexamined domain in policy, educational discourses and practices (Hallett and Prout 2003). If children are humanity's hope for the future (Chawla 2001), reconceptualisations of childhood are a pressing issue. For ECE this means that rethinking childhood has to be a core aspect of eco-focused pedagogies.

Early childhood education: the global context

For the past decade, education, including ECE, has been re-shaped by global discourses, institutions and policy (Burbules and Torres 2000). On a global scale, ECE provision is concentrated in urban environments and while neither childhood nor sustainability have featured particularly strongly as topics for critical discussion in early childhood policy, global initiatives, such as UNICEF's child-friendly city initiative draw together children's rights discourse and ecological sustainability (Malone 2006). Globally, urbanisation is a key driver in policy development for sustainable cities, and child-friendly cities are by definition cities that support children's rights 'to live in safe, clean, and healthy environments' (Tranter and Malone 2008, 20). This calls for a more strongly focused interdisciplinary discourse in ECE. For instance, scholarship from the sociology of childhood and critical childhood studies, with its emerging interest in urban childhoods (Gleeson and Sipe 2006) draws attention to issues of sustainability through its focus on the relationship between childhood and urban environments. ECE is set to benefit from closer research ties across disciplines to open up some conceptual strongholds – this is relevant when it comes to critical engagement with current trends in educational policy which are largely driven by economic imperatives.

Global institutions, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have 'required remarkable influence on education policy' (Moutsios 2010, 121). Education, no longer a national concern, is a transnational affair which provides both challenges and potential for global issues, such as education for sustainability. Governments in OECD countries are paying considerable attention to ECE as a site for investment in human capital (Dahlberg and Moss

2005). An example of this was the 2010 inaugural UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, titled 'Building the wealth of nations' (Umayahara 2011) which explicitly promoted ECCE (early childhood care and education) as the first and foundational step for building the wealth of nations, to be actioned through the *Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation: Harnessing the Wealth of Nations* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2010). At OECD level, ECE is now promoted as the sector within education with potentially high return of investment for society at large (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2006). ECE is becoming integrated into the life-long learning agenda, albeit under the mandate of creating future contributors to the global knowledge economy (Duhn 2006).

In line with other OECD countries, ECE in New Zealand has been the subject of increased governmental interest. Evidence of this governmental focus are a raft of policy documents that include *Pathways to the Future*, a 10 year strategic plan, supported by successive governments, with a clear emphasis on raising and maintaining quality participation (Stuart 2009). ECE, in New Zealand as elsewhere, is a heterogeneous sector which includes childcare centres, kindergartens, home-based and community-based services.

As noted early childhood scholar Moss (2007) points out, meanings of what ECE is, are contestable. OECD-inspired, human-capital focused, policy tends to see early years' education services as places where predetermined outcomes shape children's learning, and as places that offer education and childcare as 'a commodity to parents-as-consumers' (Moss 2007, 7). Moss argues that discussing the purpose of ECE at national and global level is a pressing issue to open up the current discourse with its emphasis on technicist and consumerist practice. Parents-as-consumers and technicist outcomes limit educators' ability to work with a curriculum and pedagogy that promotes children's critical thinking and encourages children's engagement with complex issues. In a parent-as-consumer context where parents' voices can be powerful, teachers' ability to hold their own depends on how teachers are valued. The ongoing foci on 'professionalism' and 'quality' in ECE research give an indication of the persistence and urgency of these issues to the field (Miller and Cable 2010; Osgood 2009; Urban 2008). A parent who requires childcare while working full-time is unlikely to be overjoyed when her four-year-old demands to walk to childcare instead of being driven because her teachers and peers discussed walking as an environmentally friendly option. Technicist approaches see ECE as a place where young children are prepared for school and where learning outcomes are measurable: watering the garden, going for long walks, preparing produce from the garden for lunch and talking about how much rubbish one lunch box contains may appear as wasted time to busy parents which, from their point of view, would be better spent learning the alphabet. The question of what parents-as-consumers want from ECE is particularly relevant when it comes to the complicated funding arrangements and availability of services which even 'multiply-advantaged consumers' (Ball and Vincent 2005, 558), those well educated, white, heterosexual couples with double-incomes, sometimes struggle with.

In light of the political, economic and social complexities that mould the dynamic and multifaceted landscape of ECE, it is possibly not surprising that education for sustainability has so far not received much attention as a research topic. There is evidence of change (Davis 2010; Siraj-Blatchford 2009), and recent publications highlight the global aspect of education for sustainability in particular as an

important feature (Duhn 2010a; Johansson 2009). It is important to note that education for sustainability is a virtually untouched concept in the New Zealand ECE childhood discourse. None of the current ECE policy documents make reference to sustainability, and while the curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996) promotes a holistic and bicultural approach to teaching and learning, it does not pay particular attention to environmental issues as an educational focus.

The following section reports on a research project, the first of its kind in New Zealand, *Titiro whakamuri, hoki whakamua – Caring for self, other and the environment in early years' teaching and learning* (Ritchie, Duhn, and Craw 2010) which investigated, from Western and Māori/indigenous perspectives, how early childhood teachers worked with the notion of ecological sustainability in their pedagogy and curriculum. In this section, particular attention is paid to the relationships between 'the global' and 'the local' to argue that the intersection between the two provides opportunities for critical engagement with education as ethics of care. Emphasising ethics as a core aspect of education disrupts a discourse that positions education as a service aimed to optimise human capital.

Researching ecological sustainability in early childhood: some insights

The project involved 10 early childhood centres and kindergartens across the country; two centres were located in Auckland, the majority were small town services. Of the 10 centres, only one centre was explicitly interested in the research topic. In fact, this centre initiated the project in a conversation with one of the researchers. Seven of the other participating kindergartens and centres had taken part in previous research which investigated biculturalism (Ritchie and Rau 2008), and these centres were arguably more interested in the research process than the topic. The other two centres were new to research, and had been selected for their interest in *Enviroschools* (Enviroschools 2008), an initiative that works with schools (but not early childhood services) across New Zealand.

The focus of this two-year qualitative study was ecological sustainability in the context of ethics of care from a bicultural perspective. The research design paid careful attention to the bicultural dimension of ECE by integrating Western and Māori (indigenous people of New Zealand) perspectives. While the full research report gives details of methodology and research design (Ritchie, Duhn, and Craw 2010), this section focuses on one aspect of the project: teachers' engagement with the intersection of global and local in the development of 'pedagogies of place'. The notion of 'place' and a place-based focus featured strongly in many of the teachers' narratives. 'Place' was often considered as a particular territory, a spatially defined area that could be described. Developing a sense of place proved to be an effective strategy for many teachers, in particular those who felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of a global topic such as climate change.

Efforts to rethink pedagogy and curriculum as aspects of the globalisation of education have centred on critical analysis of the relationship between local specificity and global issues (Edwards and Usher 2008; Slattery 2006; Sykes 2008). Considering place and the local in education in relation to globalisation unsettles the notion of globalisation as 'happening elsewhere', and as inevitable global change which eventually trickles down to the local (Larner and Walters 2002). The importance of overcoming the potential paralysis of the 'trickle down' discourse is evident in teachers' narratives of feeling initially lost:

I was a teacher that knew about global warming and environment issues on a very low scale and I definitely mean low. I entered the project thinking that I could not change anything being just one person and what I did at home was enough for me. When we first started talking about environmental sustainability I did the very minimal and was initially hesitant toward the changes that we were discussing... My awareness was not great and the changes were quite daunting as I did not really understand what impact we as teachers and people could have or what we could do.

Another teacher articulated her understanding of the global as ‘happening elsewhere’ in the following way:

Climate change is an issue that is difficult to address meaningfully in ECE for a number of reasons. There is no immediately visible impact on our lives in New Zealand and thinking about the topic can be an uncomfortable, even terrifying experience. In addition the issues are complex. There are many uncertainties – we don’t know what will happen, it is not always clear what we should be doing. And there is potential for harm – how can important and urgent issues be addressed in ways that empower rather than paralyse?

Introducing ecological sustainability as a global concern generated discomfort and unease for some teachers by unsettling ECE discourse with its traditional uncritical attachment to nature. An effect of the disruption was the challenge to the sense of professional self which became visible as resistance to change (Elliott and Davis 2009), and as commitment to leadership (Duhn 2010b):

At the start of the project, teachers did not see the need to participate in something so big. We could not see why this was important. There was resistance to change practices. It required strong leadership to get teachers on board.

For some participants the emphasis on the relationship between local and global disrupted the notion of the early childhood centre as a ‘special place’ and challenged the professional discourse of the teacher as ‘protector’. It fostered critical engagement by creating spaces for engagement that go beyond the narrow confines of ‘place’ and the paralysis of ‘the global’ (Nespor 2008). Leadership took the form of action. One of the strategies used to build first interconnections was to take stock of existing practices:

After we attended the initial hui [meeting with all participants and researchers]...we did a review of where we are at with ecological sustainability in our Kindergarten. We were surprised at how many things we already had in place and how green-minded we were as a team.

For this team, stock-taking provided a foundation for ongoing development of practices that addressed caring for ‘place’ in relation to local specificity, including local history.

Emerging pedagogies of place

Place-making as democratic practice: the cultural and the political

Thinking about what makes a place included an awareness of indigenous knowledges because they are specific to Aotearoa New Zealand. Focusing on ‘place’

promoted recognition of the significance of Māori knowledge, and also of the ‘otherness’ of Māori knowledge (Jones 2001). As one of the teachers’ pointed out, the project’s dual emphasis on Western and Māori knowledges brought some insecurities to the fore:

The scope of the research seemed daunting because of the Māori aspect, of which we felt quite ignorant. Where to start?

Engagement with local history and politics took different forms which arose from existing practices and knowledges. While for some teachers bicultural politics, policies and practices played a central role from the beginning, for others the awareness of local history and politics meant stepping outside of their ‘comfort zone’. The following newsletter to parents sums up the teachers’ initiatives related to developing a ‘wider sense of place’, but it does not indicate how new to the centre this engagement with the local marae (tribal meeting place) actually was. Making contact and organising a visit were first steps towards building relationships with the local indigenous community. A small group of teachers and families attended a tree-planting day at the local marae as part of their engagement with ecological sustainability.

We turned up to a tree planting day at ..Marae at the end of the month. It rained a lot of the day, however, we had a great time, planted lots of trees and were treated to a scrumptious hangi [earth oven] feast afterwards. We hope to make this an annual event with more families coming along next year.

One of the effects of the encounter was that teachers and children began to learn

all about Matariki [Māori New Year]...this has included reading books and learning about what Matariki means, making stars, planting vegetables, which many of our families brought for us, weaving with paper, making tapa prints, making a wonderful scarecrow using children’s own design ideas, to protect our growing plants.

Although all ECE centres were committed to bicultural practices, for some of the centres located in small towns and semi-rural communities, indigenous knowledges and ways of being and doing were a core aspect of their engagement with the global issues of ecological sustainability from the start. These centres had participated in a previous research project which had examined bicultural partnership practices (Ritchie and Rau 2008). Many of these teachers, Māori and Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders), understood caring for the environment within the context of care for self and other. The Western separation between global and local seemed irrelevant: caring for self and other meant caring holistically for the earth, Papatuanuku, the earth mother of Māori cosmology. Concentrating on Māori/Pākehā historical interconnections created an awareness of the specificity of ‘place’ and culture:

This is a special day for New Zealand celebrating the partnership between Māori and Pākehā. We talk with the children about how the seven waka [canoe] came to New Zealand. This a great opportunity to introduce new te reo [language] to the children and the waiata Ngā Waka [waka song]. Resources were used to show visual representations of the waka. Children constructed their own waka that they paddled while singing the waiata.

Belonging to earth, and caring for ‘place’ began to address ecological sustainability within a framework that includes historical analysis and contemporary politics (Sykes 2008).

In one of the urban centres, teachers decided to join local initiatives and networks. This aspect of pedagogy of place arises out of an understanding that early childhood centres can be places for democratic practice and active citizenship (Moss 2007).

World Environment Day last year was celebrated with walks including to our local creek and a focus leading up to the day where parents were encouraged to look at alternative methods of transportation so some of the photos here are of carpooling and kids coming on bikes and public transport to Kindy. And we’ve made links with the local transition town’s network [<http://www.transitiontowns.org.nz>] and so we are getting information from them and passing that on to parents about topics of interest and talks such as the Western Highway Development and cycle advocacy and things like that.

For a centre in a small town on the West coast the research led to a strengthening of connections within the existing community which prides itself on its sustainable practices. For this centre, developing a ‘pedagogy of place’ meant becoming more vocal and visible within their wider community to further align their practices with existing local knowledges and ‘ways of doing’:

...what’s happening in the childcare, is actually really already in place, it’s not like you have to go out there as crusaders into the community and say this is a new message, because the message is actually so out there already.

For the teachers in this centre, a pedagogy of place incorporated making some of their pedagogy explicit to whānau (community) and children by, literally, entangling them in their practice. Teachers decided to focus on recycling to explore issues of consumption. They made visible how small items, such as yoghurt containers, become global problems by creating a ‘yoghurt curtain’ with the children. A teacher explains in a conversation that it was not only the recycling they wanted to explore, but also the underlying cause of consumption and mass production:

You get rid of that particular yoghurt pot. . . I mean you can, you can just get big pots and put it into plastic recycling. . . But also it was so tangible, it kind of trapped parents and children when they walked in the door and then the wind blew, it used to tangle it up and the children kept talking about, how much noise it used to make.

Places of ‘natureculture’

Pedagogy of place in this context involved thinking about global issues, such as how easy it is to consume without considering the cost to others. Teachers, parents and children began to talk about plastic in relation to increased landfill, pollution of the oceans, use of fossil fuels, production and recycling of plastic in places other than New Zealand, for example Bangladesh. Their pedagogy of place did not stop at the front gate. The ripples created in the process of thinking and doing ‘ecological sustainability’ created a web of interconnections, some of them fleeting and others potentially long-lasting. ‘Place’ may be a comforting notion that allows careful exploration of complicated topics for some teachers, while for others ‘place’ is a

much more fluid concept that enables rapid expansion from the local to the regional and the global. From indigenous perspectives, 'place' may hold great significance as a local site and territory may need to be protected and even reclaimed from too much 'fluidity' and openness (Miller 2010). ECE is in a powerful position to critically and respectfully explore diverse notions of place as a complex assemblage of materiality and discourse, of human and non-human (Braidotti 2002).

Working with ethics of care, for self, for others, for 'place' and for the planet (Heise 2008) provides a rich mandate for ECE. Putting such a mandate into action requires integration of a wide range of diverse perspectives, collaborations and partnerships, critical engagement with ideas, discourses, practices, politics and policies and the ability and willingness to take risks. Making ECE more than a sheltered enclave that is dominated by romantic notions of childhood and nature requires imagination and courage, heart, body and mind. It demands discussion of the purpose, possibilities and intent of ECE for society, and this discussion has to include children (Pienaar 2010). Such discussion is vital to challenge human capital perspectives, often focused on economic discourse only and currently the main policy driver in New Zealand. It is timely to imagine ECE as a place where, as Donna Haraway (2008) puts it, 'natureculture' flourishes by creating intersections across old divides.

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Notes on contributor

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