

# TO CONNECT OR NOT?

Research exploring if children are really disconnected from nature?



Having worked in the Outdoors for 15 years, I have continually heard from colleagues, parents, teachers, and group leaders that today, children are disconnected from nature. Many would compare their own childhood to that of today's children and say that they now have less freedom to roam, are not used to walking on uneven terrain and do not know the names of local species of flora and fauna. Indeed, when delivering a workshop on mammals to a group of primary school children, I asked them, where do you think a bat might find its food, to which one replied, "Tesco's?".

Keen to develop my understanding as to why children are disconnected and how environmental education could reverse this trend, I undertook a PhD.

That journey questioned my assumptions, finding that children are not necessarily disconnected from nature, but rather experience a different type of connection to that of previous generations.

So as to provide context, I thought it relevant to present how this finding has roots in environmental education definitions and practices. Firstly, this article outlines my PhD on a sociological study of environmental education in Ireland. Secondly, there is a short discussion of children's connection with nature. This will focus on the type of connection children have today and how this has changed from when we were young. Thirdly, I present the two main strands of environmental education that emerged from the research before looking at how having an awareness of both strands in our practice can help to enhance the actual connection children have with nature overall.

## RESEARCH STUDY

My research mapped the evolution of environmental education in Ireland and the influences of wider societal, historical, and political developments on its (in)effectiveness to (re)connect children with nature. It examined the concepts of education, the natural environment, and sustainable development that underpin environmental education, as well as capturing the diverse experiences of environmental education practitioners, primary school staff, parents and children.

The programmes studied promoted hands-on outdoor environmental education. This holistic approach was of particular interest to me as it emphasised building a relationship with nature to address the disconnection discussed in my introduction. I wanted to find out if these hands-on programmes created a connection with nature, and, if so, what this connection looked like.

A total of 47 semi-structured interviews were completed with practitioners (n=18), primary school staff (n=11), and families (parents and children n=18). Practitioners worked in state-funded, semi-state-funded, and NGO-led environmental education programmes across Ireland. Primary school staff and family interviews took place within the Galway region and schools were classified by location (rural/ urban/ city centre) and the socio-economic profile of pupils. Families were recruited through



each primary school. One island, off the west coast of Ireland, was chosen for a comparative analysis of environmental education in primary schools, and children's relationship with their natural environment.

## WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION?

Definitions of environmental education are elusive and contradictory (1). Many early policy definitions adopt a rational tone that marginalises any emotional connection with nature in favour of solving global environmental problems (2, 3, 4). Later definitions align environmental education with emerging ideas of sustainability, and it is said to be multi-disciplinary, occurring in both informal and formal educational settings with a focus on educational outcomes (5, 6).

More recently, the term 'environmental education' has evolved to include concepts of nature, the outdoors, the natural world, learning, and education. This creates an array of meanings. Place-based education, place-based learning, Outdoor Learning, nature play/ natural play, and free play, in particular, focus on experiential approaches while also emphasising cognitive and attitudinal development through outdoor play (7, 8). This interplay between hands-on learning through outdoor experiences is more holistic than earlier definitions. However, there is little critical examination of the varying nuances these concepts exhibit, particularly from the perspective of the learner (1, 9, 10). As environmental education continues to develop, finding a one-size-fits-all definition is problematic.

This is, in part, due to its relationship with formal education. Formal education is a primary avenue for environmental education, yet practices often contradict the dominant functions of education. Environmental education encourages learners to be active thinkers yet within formal education learners receive *"other people's knowledge and thinking"* (11 p.147). This somewhat troublesome relationship with formal education can leave environmental education vulnerable to marginalisation as *"it does not fit neatly into any traditional subject areas"* (12 p.339). Moreover, recent definitions integrate environmental education with areas of sustainability which dilute its impact as opposed to strengthening it.

My research presented a working definition prioritising the learner as an active agent in his/her environmental education. It is not a short definition and some might ask why I add another one into the mix! I do so to promote learner relevancy as part of any environmental education effort. This is central in developing the long-term environmental attitudes and behaviours advocated by earlier definitions, yet often overlooked.

Environmental education uses learner-relevant approaches and practices that work within the social, economic and political barriers in order to facilitate children's experiences in the natural environment and their development of environmental attitudes, appreciation, empathy, and moral and ethical obligations towards human-environment relations.

At this point, I wondered- if environmental education is so tricky to define, what this says about my initial assumptions that children are disconnected from nature. Had I delivered environmental programmes that held any meaning for those learners on the receiving end?

## READ THE FULL RESEARCH

Visit NUI Galway's research library to download Sarah's full findings for her sociological study of environmental education in Ireland:

<http://bit.ly/Reconnect-nature-Sarah>

## TO CONNECT OR NOT TO CONNECT? THAT IS THE QUESTION

A key finding of my research was that children do have a connection with nature; it is just that it is not the same type of connection as the interviewed parents, school staff and environmental educators had when they were young. In Richard Louv's book *Last child in the woods*, he coined the term 'nature deficit disorder', describing a growing disconnect between children and the natural environment. Unlike previous generations, children today spend more time indoors immersed in structured activities and are more frequently under adult supervision. The building of infrastructure, housing, and industrial development has altered children's access to the natural environment. The lack of amenities, as well as health and safety issues, has restricted children's freedom to roam.

The suggestion that without direct experiences in nature, children's *"senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically and this reduces the richness of human experience"* (13 p.34) is emotive. However, it does not question children's capacity to connect irrespective of the changed social, cultural, and physical barriers that now exist (14, 15).

For the children interviewed, access to play in, and the availability of, green areas differed. What came through, however, was that once outdoors how they responded was essentially the same. Children in more built-up areas showed a sense of attachment to small places such as a hideout, den, or fort in their garden. The children living on the rural island explored a wider area, such as a woodland, that is very much outside of the 'garden parameter' of more urban areas. The children living in housing estates



described their favourite garden animal and what it eats, while children living on the rural island had a larger repertoire of animals such as sea birds, dolphins, and seals which were part of their immediate surroundings.

Others felt a sense of ownership of the environment, for example naming a rocky island close to the house 'Tracey Island', and then 'Death Star' from the movie *Star Wars*. The descriptions from children show that a connection with nature remains. The question is whether or not this reflects the type of connection sought in environmental education practices.

## ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME LEAF

Environmental education practices can be divided into two strands (15). One focuses on global environmental problems and how to solve them, while the second approach links to a local sense of place and belonging. There are potential issues in relying on one strand more than the other. Developing a connection to a local place is positive, though this connection can be enhanced by bringing in more information about the rest of the country and world. Focusing mostly on global issues can lead to a sense of what David Sobel (1996) called 'ecophobia', or a sense of alienation from the environment, stemming from the enormous scale of the problems (16). Furthermore, environmental educators interviewed often designed programmes based on what they think a connection should be, which is often informed by their childhood experiences outdoors. If the children of today have a different connection to that of previous generations, their reaction to these programmes may appear as a disconnection.

This poses another question: is environmental education trying to recreate a particular type of connection that is not necessarily as relevant to children today? The views and opinions of children are largely untapped, yet can greatly contribute to the design, content,

and successful delivery of environmental education programmes. Such child-led approaches can make more visible their existing connections with nature.

Children will develop more agency and their own connection, through their own curiosity and ingenuity. That is not to say that programmes should not have a structured approach to learning or that children do not require some direction in their learning. A balance is needed between input from the educator and choices made by children.

## SUMMARY

The point of this article is to get us thinking about how we connect with children and their understandings of the natural world. By providing a balance between local and global approaches, environmental education can be more effective. Instead of focusing on a 'disconnection', we should be trying to enhance the connection that already exists. This can be done by bringing more balance into our already effective practices.

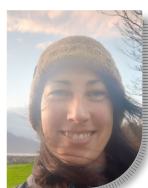
Why not ask children how they connect with and enjoy the outdoors? Children can greatly contribute to the design, content, and successful delivery of environmental education programmes. How much of each strand of environmental education, global issues or place-based, is present in your programmes? Environmental educators can further develop their connection and ensure that programmes are relevant to the learner. This will not only greatly enhance the experience for your students, but can also give you more enjoyment from your time teaching in nature ■

## REFERENCES

1. O'Malley (2015). The relationship between children's perceptions of the natural environment and solving environmental problems. *Policy and practice: a development education review*, 21, p87-104.
2. Stapp, Bennett, Bryan, et al. (1969). The concept of environmental education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 1(1), 30-31.
3. UNESCO (1975). *The Belgrade Charter: a framework for environmental education*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000017772>.
4. UNESCO (1977). *Tbilisi Declaration*. Available at: <http://www.gdrc.org/uem/ee/tbilisi.html>.
5. IUCN-NEP-WWF (1991). *Caring for the Earth: a strategy for sustainable living*. Available: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/documents/cfe-003.pdf>.
6. Ahmedabad Recommendations (2007). *Moving forward from Ahmedabad: environmental education in the 21st century*. Available at: [https://unevoc.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/docs/AhmedabadFinalRecommendations.pdf](https://unevoc.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/docs/AhmedabadFinalRecommendations.pdf).
7. White (2004). *Young children's relationship with nature: it's importance to children's development & the earth's future*. Available: [https://www.childrenandnature.org/uploads/White\\_YoungChildren.pdf](https://www.childrenandnature.org/uploads/White_YoungChildren.pdf).
8. Francis, Paige and Lloyd (2013). Middle years students' experiences in nature: a case study on nature-play. *Teaching Science*, 59(2), 20-30.
9. Bonnet and Williams (1998). Environmental education and primary children's attitudes towards nature and the environment. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 28(2), 159-74.
10. Rickinson (2001). Learners and learning in environmental education: a critical review of the evidence. *The Journal of Environmental Education Research*, 7(3), 207-320.
11. Stevenson (2007). Schooling and environmental education: contradictions in purpose and practice. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(2), 139-153.
12. Gough and Gough (2010). Environmental education in Kridel, C. (ed.) *the SAGE Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies*. New York: Sage Publications. Available at: [https://www.latrobe.edu.au/education/downloads/gough\\_n\\_Environmental-Ed.pdf](https://www.latrobe.edu.au/education/downloads/gough_n_Environmental-Ed.pdf).
13. Louv (2005). *Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. North Carolina: Algonquin Books.
14. Nagel (2004). Lend them an ear: the significance of listening to children's experiences of environmental education. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 12(2), 115-127.
15. O'Malley (2014). *(Re)connecting children with nature? A sociological study of environmental education in Ireland*. Available: <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/handle/10379/4784>.
16. Sobel (1996). *Beyond ecophobia: reclaiming the heart in nature education*. USA: The Orion Society.

## IMAGES

Photographs have been sourced at pxhere.com. Photographers retain copyright.



## AUTHOR

Dr. Sarah O'Malley, EU Projects Officer, Limerick City and County Council, Ireland.

Sarah has lectured and worked in the areas of Outdoor Learning, environmental sociology, education, disability and inclusion. She has published on these subjects and convenes the southeast Outdoor Learning Research Practice Hub (UK) which is supported by the University of Cumbria, IOL, Natural England, and LoIC.