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Introduction: Learning With Treescapes in Environmentally Endangered Times

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Introduction

Learning With Treescapes in Environmentally Endangered Times

Samyia Ambreen and Kate Pahl

As we write this in a cool and rainy north of England, the planet is burning. Some of the highest temperatures in Earth's history are being recorded in Death Valley, United States. Italy is hitting temperatures of 118 degrees Fahrenheit (48 degrees Celsius). Rhodes is on fire. I (Kate) remember when I realized the extent of the disaster that is the climate emergency. I was listening to a geologist describing the slow and then very fast loss of a glacier in the High Arctic. We are realizing that our world is slipping away from us.

However, it is vital not to lose hope. We have to live and think in a different way. Our global health rests on developing new ways of knowing and being. Educators are at the forefront of advocating for change. Issue 50 of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series*, "Learning With Treescapes in Environmentally Endangered Times," is intended to be hopeful. We collected these articles to contribute to the envisioning of new practices and to an architecture of knowledge to waymark a more sustainable route into the future.

Trees are vital for the present and future health of the planet, its inhabitants, and ecosystems. They store carbon and breathe out oxygen. Their leaves filter dangerous pollutants. Their branches provide shade and a shelter for a myriad of other beings, allowing diverse species to thrive. They provide cooling, control erosion, and filter water. Life on Earth depends upon trees.

Yet trees have no voice in the high-stakes fight for a livable planet. Deforestation continues despite constant human protests and the protests of more-than-human plant and animal species. Here in the United Kingdom, only 13 percent of the country remains forested. Over the past 100 years, the Earth has lost as much forest as it had in the previous 9,000 years of human habitation, with one-third of the Earth's forests now gone (Ritchie & Roser, 2021).

CENTERING TREES

Even as human-driven destruction of mass tracts of trees continues, in this issue we highlight that trees live with us and amongst us. Common worlding is a collective pedagogical approach recognizing that children grow up, live, and learn within more-than-human worlds—within complex and diverse ecological communities, not just in human societies. Our common worlds are the interdependent, life-sustaining ecological communities that we share with all manner of other beings, entities, and forces on Earth (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 74). The common worlds understanding of human/nature intra-actions finds humans and nature to be mutually constituted and transformed by their encounters (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013).

Looking at humans and trees as interdependent through common worlding, we pay close attention to the tree, human, and non-human worlds, noticing their movements and intra-actions. Common worlding pedagogies rely on an openness, enabling teachers and learners to be members of the wider ecological community. They require teachers and learners to engage in collaborative intra-actions with the world around them, to avoid teaching about the world as if it were "out there," and to deepen teachers' and learners' understandings of relations with the more-than-human world around them.

Jickling and colleagues' (2018) work on the Crex Collective's six touchstones for Wild Pedagogies is also useful. The six touchstones offer practitioners basic principles to consider nature as an equal contributor in learning about human/nature relations. They include nature as co-teacher; complexity, the unknown and spontaneity; locating the wild; time and practice; socio-cultural change and building alliances and the human community.

The term "wild" is used to challenge western Eurocentric understanding of nature and human relationships. The "wild pedagogies" framework critiques the increasing control over educators and calls for re-wilding the education process itself.

The expansion in human movement across regional and national borders as a result of migration calls for researchers and educators to have diverse and embodied understandings of human relationships with places, landscapes, nature, more-than-human beings, and the wild. A "wild" view of education that recognizes that nature is a co-teacher and draws on indigenous perspectives (e.g., Kimmerer, 2020) is important to disrupt Western understanding of the Anthropocene. This perspective presents global humanity as equally responsible for ecological catastrophes (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2023).

The separation of humans from non-humans and the turning of Earth into property are connected to colonialism and neoliberalism, as many writers have described (e.g., Deloughrey, 2019). From this critique has come a concerted focus on remembering, and recovering lost roots and memories. As Deloughrey (2019) writes, "Our increasing awareness of climate change is catalyzing new imaginaries" (p. 1). These new imaginaries include concepts of connected entanglements, and a rhizomic and embodied awareness of the planet and its beings. Anna Tsing (2021) has reflected on these connectivities and how they inflect our lives. Placing trees, as beings who speak and can be listened to, on an equal footing in our relational world alters the dynamics of whom we are accountable to and why. This means that we need to determine whose voices matter and how we can recalibrate our worldly relations. The aim is to exemplify how when stories in which non-humans share agency with humans (Jickling, et al., 2018) are told, readers are enabled to challenge western-centric, adult-centric views of human/tree connection and human and modernist assumptions about humans as the elite in multispecies encounters.

The term "treescapes" is helpful to acknowledge the daily trees in our lives, in our streets, parks, and playgrounds, as well as forests and woodlands. In this issue, contributors describe how relationships with trees can become part of our educational landscape. Articles range from early care settings through adult gatherings. Collectively, they challenge perspectives that imagine trees simply as "resources," instead presenting a relational vision of living responsibly and responsively with the trees we depend upon.

We need to respond to the crisis of deforestation globally, as global citizens of the world, and also within our neighborhoods and localities. As educators, we are keenly aware that attentiveness to the ways in which children and young people are positioned within this debate is critically important. While there is a consensus that children will inherit the world that we adults have created, the mechanisms to hear children's voices and construct a useful shift in thinking within curriculum and pedagogies is lacking. The climate crisis is children's abiding challenge. Nxumalo and colleagues (2022) argue that:

we see a disconnect between how quickly human and more-than-human lives are changing as a result of climate change and the lack of accompanying responsive and responsible changes in curriculum and pedagogy in pre-K-12 schooling and in higher education. (p. 97)

It is this challenge that we address here. The articles in this issue explore the myriad ways in which it

is possible to relate to a tree, to learn from treescapes, and to become more attuned to the land and the trees. We hear the voices of children and young people within this space and are attentive to the ways in which young people are living in a world that does not recognize their interests.

We also seek to acknowledge that treescapes are more than natural environments. In their co-existence with humans, treescapes are wrapped into a wider landscape of biodiversity—they host small animals and insects, they reduce carbon, they provide shade. Yusoff (2012) acknowledges the complexities of experiencing biodiversity loss and recognizes the relationship between representation and conservation—trees, by implication, need to be “noticed” to be saved or repaired. Yusoff’s point is that the non-human subject is always subjugated by representation. Trees cannot speak back to most humans in a language that they can understand. Concepts of kinship and alliance, drawing on ways of knowing that connect to the land (e.g., Kimmerer, 2013/2020), can provide a path into a communicative mode of listening to trees. This approach might require an awareness of the roots of the rupture between humans and trees and a commitment to moving away from discourses of extraction, such as seeing forests as timber and for burning—perspectives that only consider trees as useful to humans but do not listen to what they know.

LEARNING WITH TREES

In this issue, we hear stories from children and young people, educators, parents, activists, policymakers, and researchers about their encounters with treescapes. The concept of treescapes provides a wider understanding of trees as not just in forests and woodlands, but in streets, parks, playgrounds, and sports grounds. Contributors to this issue describe trees as offering expansive, embodied, and affectively powerful experiences of learning and connection. Implicit or explicit in all of this work is the urgency to nurture a commitment to protecting and restoring treescapes locally and globally.

Articles in this issue include stories from teachers and their students about learning with trees, and descriptions of how engagements with trees can transform research and ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Across multiple pieces, authors reflect on how connecting with trees facilitates greater connection among humans and between humans and the more-than-human occupants of our planet.

We chose to include artwork, photographs, and video produced by both adults and children because we believe that these are important ways to experience and think about our relationships to trees. Rautio and colleagues (2022) ask, “How could different kinds of knowledge co-exist, potentially generating more just worlds? Crafting common grounds, spaces where different ‘sciences’ could meet, would be an effort toward (multispecies) democracy yet to come” (p. 777). Our decision to use multiple media and the work of children in this issue represents an experiment in that we are presenting different kinds of knowledge in one issue, including the knowledge of the worms (see Zoey Ashcroft’s piece on “Traces of Worms”).

TREES AS FOUNDATIONAL TO LEARNING

As Tiffany Marie illustrates, trees can be foundational to student learning, connecting them with histories, heritages, and contemporary identifications and practices that exceed and counter traditional schooling. Marie brings her Yoruba indigeneity and stories of her family’s kinship with the trees of their Arkansas homes to support her high school students’ reconnection to their landed heritage. Arguing that social critiques cannot be divorced from physical environments, Marie offers practices that can help students to experience more authentically articulated possibilities for their present and future.

For Marie’s students, as for the students of Samyia Ambreen, Khawla Badwan, and Kate Pahl, starting with trees provided a different, more expansive space from which to think and act. As Ambreen, Badwan, and Pahl (this issue) observe:

Children’s stories about their lived experiences and encounters with trees in this case study revealed that children placed their social relations with other humans and the more-than-human world at the center of their lives.

Trees also become co-teachers, enabling children to engage in skill-learning. Children were engrossed in self-directed and experiential learning whilst playing with the mud, woods, sticks, and tree leaves. These two examples require educators to explore, with children, the relationships between children and trees with an attuned attentiveness to the non-human, including worms, mud, sticks, twigs, and the rustling sounds of the trees—this whole approach to trees centers the trees in a different way in educational contexts compared to much conventional educational practice.

Co-learning *with* trees, having a dialogue with them, learning *from* them, is where we can start. Stephanie Jones, Lindsey Lush, and Sarah Whitaker (this issue) describe children “making kin” with trees through their interactions:

[T]hey climbed trees, threw balls and fabric into trees, they ate lunch and snacks beneath the trees, and they sat in a circle of “chairs” made of cut tree trunks. There was a large tree that had fallen across a deep ravine that linked one person’s backyard to another person’s backyard. The more agile children scurried across the tree-trunk bridge without hesitation and others took it slower, sometimes backing up to the safety of the ground when they looked down and realized how far the fall would be if they lost their balance.

The trees in Jones, Lush, and Whitaker’s after-school playground offered creative learning spaces for children and young people. Stephanie Jones describes the feeling of being “at home” with trees and the richness of this experience as one that permeated her life as an educator. This experience led to a relational understanding of trees within her practice. Within this, also lies an understanding by the authors of the dangers of how tree spaces can be used in enactments of radicalized violence. Forging a new relational engagement with treescapes can also offer a way out of dystopian futures and point toward a kinder engagement with the world. The “now-ness” of trees can help us through this process. Central to this is a “being with” and connecting with the forest.

Re-forestation initiatives in the United Kingdom and the United States will lead to new ways of working with youth that engages them in the mode of trees as teachers. In making a space of connection, Gill Forrester, Jo Maker, Will Price, Hollie Davison, and Heather Gilbert describe a Youth Landscapers project in the National Forest in the United Kingdom:

Using the local landscape as their inspiration, the group developed and delivered thought-provoking and creative art projects which included the “Telling of the Bees” and “The Underneath;” working intergenerationally and connecting with local experts, including a beekeeper, a mushroom grower, ecologists, and forestry workers, to draw upon their breadth of knowledge and expertise.

Forrester and colleagues summarize the benefits of engaging children in outdoor learning as part of their engagement with the National Forest Company’s school-based intervention programs in Great Britain. The outdoor learning programs hosted by the National Forest Company provide opportunities for children to engage in outdoor learning on a wide scale. Detailing the kind of learning that happens as part of the programs, Forrester describes how children take part in activities from storytelling, art, and sensory tasks to shelter-building, cooking, and fire-lighting. Through these examples, the authors

offer multiple mechanisms for children and young people to connect with treescapes in a way that suits them. Improved social skills and academic achievement as well as an increased awareness of their newly developed treescape heritage remained prominent in child/tree encounters. Children not only learn practical skills but become decision-makers and leaders, recognizing and valuing the skills of others. For many children, connection with nature is reported as promoting their desire to protect and care for not just local treescapes, but the wider national and global environment for future generations. Both the young people and the educators are also encouraged to envision potential barriers—such as difficulties accessing woodlands or ways of seeing woodlands as dangerous places—as opportunities for re-imagination in order to make a difference in their communities.

TREESCAPE METHODOLOGIES AS POINTS OF CONNECTION

Methodologies, such as sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), involving visual and sensorial connectedness, produce understandings that include multi-sensory encounters with trees that include smell, touch, sound, and visuals. This special issue highlights visual and sensory methods, in which children, young people, and adults narrate their worlds through drawings, photographs, and videos.

Four pieces feature the work of children engaged with trees. Six-year-old Gretel and 9-year-old Ingrid Olson provide beautiful paintings and commentary on real and imagined treescapes. In another piece, Ingrid and Gretel's mother, Stephanie Schuurman-Olson, goes with the girls into an aspen grove in Alberta, Canada to explore and experience reciprocity and relationality through singing and deep listening to and with their surroundings. Zoey's field drawings outline the wiggly paths of worms through the underground treescapes in her field notes. The traces of the worms were left on the page. Rex and his mother explored together the treescapes in an urban park in Moss Side in Manchester, United Kingdom in a way that was reciprocal and embodied.

These contributions demonstrate a kind of environmental education that is felt and embodied (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). Through such engagement with urban parks and small-scale urban gardening, lost or previously unknown skills and sensibilities come into view. Children explore trees by feeling them, climbing them, listening to them, and lying on the ground looking up through them. They engage with imaginary trees, shaped by transnational grandparents and ancestors, and other people in their lives.

Alexandra Délano Alonso and Macro Saavedra also use painting to explore their connection with treescapes. They say, "What walking among the trees has taught us is that every art is an invitation to the mutuality of life. Through paintings, it means creating an opening of treescapes and orchards for people to become a part of and inhabit." The connectivity of trees, as described by Peter Wohlleben (2021) is much more complex than previously thought. Wohlleben argues that our thriving rests on the trees thriving. A reciprocal relationship to trees can open up new ways of being and learning. Learning with trees can be understood as dialogic (see also Simard, 2022) and more connected than we know. Kimmerer (2013/2020) argues for a radical listening, which involves a connectivity with trees as co-beings. We live within a world in which to become human "acknowledges ourselves as connected with other living beings, including animals, trees, plants and stones who share the planet with us" (Seidler, 2022, p. 36).

Kostas Magos and Irida Tsevreni illustrate that for the adults with whom they work, trees offer connections with homelands far away. For the early childhood education students and refugees, they walked with in the countryside near Thessaly, Greece, the trees encountered brought back memories of trees from earlier times and places, as well as stories about the significance of trees in cultural practices and myths. Ultimately, the authors argue, the trees served as bridges to greater understanding and solidarity amongst participants.

Jayne Osgood, Suzanne Axelsson, Tamsin Cavaliero, Maire Hanniffy, and Susan McDonnell, also engaging with adults, demonstrate the use of “arboreal methodologies” to dismantle anthropocentric perspectives and romanticized views of children in nature. Osgood and colleagues add to the issue the urgency of calling into question “the narrow concern with how nature benefits child well-being, development, and learning.” These authors argue for a more realistic assessment of living in the world—including a forest world recreated by humans and capitalism—but one that offers thoughts about “how children and adults can live, learn, and play together with and in technoscapes and treescapes.”

Ways of knowing, researching, and doing rest on disciplines that themselves are linked to particular modes of thinking. As McKittrick (2021) argues, “Method-making is the generating and gathering of ideas—across-with-outside-with-against normative disciplines—that seek out liberation within our present system of knowledge” (p. 47). We need to tell different stories in order to appreciate and respond to this radically different world (Moss, 2014).

THE “HOW” OF TREES: WAYS OF KNOWING WITH TREES

Articles in this issue show that appreciating trees requires slow moments spread out over longer timescapes, as children and young people come to value and listen to trees (Clark, 2023). This requires an aesthetic dimension, recognizing the beauty of the tree, together with care for the tree as a living being (Olssen, 2023, p. 186). These practices of care and attention to the growth of the tree over decades and centuries can provide us with hope for our future. Zuleika Fertullien-Hines (this issue), for example, describes how observing and talking about trees become part of daily practice in her urban preschool over the course of the school year:

The trees outside of the classrooms were imbued in the daily conversations between the children and the teachers; when the teachers described the wind and pointed to the movement of the branches, when a bird perched itself on the tree and seemed to look inside the window, when a child saw the leaves change colors in the fall. There were ongoing opportunities to naturally speak and point to the tree and find connections with the books that we read throughout the year.

For Nadia Anjum a tree-planting effort organized with teachers, parents, and children at a school in Punjab Province in Pakistan speaks to hope for the present and the future. Pakistan is, according to the Global Climate Risk Index, one of the countries most adversely affected by climate change, suffering severe heat waves, unchecked flooding, and accelerating levels of pollution from policies and practices that exist far beyond Pakistan’s borders. Anjum describes the Plant for Pakistan Project in which her school participated, and how the teachers moved beyond planting to provide an awareness campaign to promote local understanding of the critical importance of creating and sustaining treescapes.

For Kate Van Haren and her fourth grade students, the study of historic and current photos and maps of the Menominee forests raised questions about changes brought to the United States by settler colonial logging. It initiated a study of how the Menominee, the Indigenous inhabitants of the region, have been involved in efforts to protect their ancestral land since their earliest interactions with European settler colonialists. Menominee practices of sustainable forestry became a hopeful model for these 9- and 10-year-olds who understood their futures as imperiled.

Such historical mappings, the studying of contemporary policies and practices, and engaging future imagining makes up the ways in which we as planetary citizens need to respond to the climate crisis. Bringing the past and future into the present alters the scale of the thinking we need to do.

TREESCAPES OF THE FUTURE

The future of trees is the future survival of all life on this planet. While trees thrive without humans, humans cannot thrive without trees. In this issue, we address the urgent necessity to move humans to connect intellectually, physically, emotionally, and affectively to trees in ways that we hope will help to motivate critically needed change. Throughout the pieces in this issue, it is clear that treescapes provide points of connection and invite embodied and relational approaches to learning. Whether or not we connect to trees, human survival is at stake. Through this issue, we want to offer hope, but hope that is entwined with action. This special issue offers us some “hows” of this practice. In each instance, there is a vision of a future that includes a healthier and more revered global and local treescape.

Learning with trees can involve different kinds of knowing with non-human partners. As Weber (2014) says, “We humans see with plants and animals just as poets see with words” (p. 26). These ways of knowing and being might involve what Lenz Taguchi (2000) calls “resistance practices,” which disrupt teachers’ notions of learning (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 111). Within education, this is a challenge in an age of high-stakes testing and neoliberal politics, but it is necessary if we are to survive as a species. Our special issue is diverse, and provocative, providing a portal into a new way of doing education, with and for the future, with the trees, and with hope.

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Kate Pahl is professor of arts and literacy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work is concerned with literacy and language practices in communities. She is the author, with Jennifer Rowsell, of *Living Literacies* (MIT Press 2020. She is currently the Principal Investigator of “Voices of the Future,” a three year project funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC exploring the relationship between children and young people and treescapes.