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Article

Youth Work for People and Planet: Integrating Insights from Ecopedagogy into Youth Work

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Abstract: Youth work is not unitary, has a diverse history, and draws upon differing traditions; however, the focus of all major youth work traditions has been anthropocentric. This approach is now challenged by young people themselves through the climate justice movement, and institutionally through the United Nations Agenda 2030 resolution, which has developed integrated Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to “balance” social, environmental, and economic imperatives. This article examines what insights can be gained from ecopedagogy that would enable youth work to fully integrate an ecological perspective alongside traditional anthropological concerns. The discussion focuses on the nexus and tensions between ecopedagogy and youth work from a theoretical perspective to draw out insights into how changes need to be made to the aims and purposes of youth work, how this might be achieved, and barriers in the current environment.

Keywords: climate justice; pedagogy; education; university; youth development; Freire; PYD; positive youth development



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1. Introduction

The purposes of this article are to elucidate and evaluate the challenges posed to youth work theory by ecopedagogy and to begin a preliminary discussion about how ecopedagogy can be integrated into youth work theory, and ultimately lead to adaptations to youth work practice. Youth work theory draws upon differing traditions [1,2] but, despite this diversity, has rarely questioned the tacit anthropocentric focus of its underpinning pedagogies, which centralises the needs, wellbeing, and flourishing of young people in their social context, but in isolation from considerations about how young peoples’ thriving is enmeshed with the wellbeing of the natural environment [3]. Ecopedagogy asserts that pedagogy should consider humans as part of natural Earth systems, whose actions contribute to natural systems, and whose needs and wants should not be viewed in isolation from how meeting human needs and wants affects the diversity and stability of natural systems and other species [4]. In other words, ecopedagogy questions the tacit anthropocentric assumptions of youth work theory. We contend that it is important to address this deficiency for two reasons: firstly because anthropocentrism is being challenged by some youth climate activists [5] and secondly because even mainstream institutions like the United Nations (UN), through Agenda 2030 [6], have acknowledged the interconnection between human needs and the natural world.

Anthropocentric assumptions are now being challenged by some young people through climate justice movements, which call for action to reduce the adverse effects of human activities on Earth systems through the assertion, for example, that there is no life on a dead planet. Climate justice activists campaign for an end to the use of fossil fuels, and “de-development” or “de-growth” calls for changes to human lifestyles in the

“developed” world to reduce unnecessary consumption, increasing social equity and ultimately improving the wellbeing of people and the planet [7]. Institutionally, through the ratification of the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 [6], there has been some formal recognition of the interconnection between human wellbeing and the wellbeing of Earth’s eco-systems.

Agenda 2030 is a plan for sustainable and equitable human development that acknowledges the dependency of human wellbeing upon the health and integrity of natural planetary systems. Agenda 2030 produced seventeen integrated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to “balance” social, environmental, and economic imperatives [6]. Some would argue that the focus on sustainability in Agenda 2030 is an acknowledgement that human actions have far-reaching impacts on natural systems [8]. Others contend that Agenda 2030 is anthropocentric, because of the priority accorded to humans, and because of the weakness of the requirements [9]. Additionally, Agenda 2030 does not systemically address the unsustainability and harmful ecological effects of excessive and unsustainable human consumption of natural resources, especially in wealthy countries [9], or the links between excessive consumption and capitalism [10]. Finally, Agenda 2030 does not question assumptions about the viability of technological solutions [9,11]. Issues raised by discussion of the benefits and limitations of the SDGs as an approach to climate justice are relevant to understanding the potential scope of ecopedagogy, and we will return to these themes in discussions of the implications of ecopedagogy for youth work.

In this article, we examine the claims of ecopedagogy and discuss their relevance to two prominent youth work approaches to praxis, namely Freirean youth work and Positive Youth Development (PYD). These two youth work approaches were chosen as the main focus of this article because of their contemporary prominence in the international literature on youth work [1]. We acknowledge that other theoretical (and a-theoretical) approaches to youth work that fall outside of these two traditions, including embedded community-based youth work, a-theoretical and pragmatic youth services work, and First Nations approaches to youth work. We do not have space to discuss these approaches in detail, but will briefly outline potential application and challenges, acknowledging there is scope for further analysis and discussion. Our approach uses the existing literature to outline the key challenges posed by ecopedagogy, to discuss their relevance, and the implications for youth work theory and practice, within the two selected youth work traditions.

2. Background

Ecopedagogy is a re-interpretation of Freirean pedagogical principles, based upon Freire’s explicit statements in his later publications, which Misiaszek [4] claims reflect ideas that were implicit in his earlier work. Misiaszek contends that the goal of ecopedagogy is for students to deepen their critical understanding of social justice issues for humans and of “the Earth” as a holistic bio-social system. In his discussions, Misiaszek differentiates between the “Earth”, which includes all ecological and social systems (including human systems) and “the world”, which is used to refer to human social systems. Early Freirean pedagogy focused on critical literacy for social justice, (“reading the world” [12]), which was understood at the time to mean developing critical literacy about how social systems and social relationships shape our understanding of meaning and human experience, and unconsciously influence our assumptions about social norms, and our values.

Ecopedagogy broadens the focus from “the world” to “the Earth”, meaning that the focus broadens to work with learners to read “all of Earth and the world as part of Earth” ([4], p. 1255) (capitalisation retained from the original). In other words, ecopedagogy extends the critical literacy concerns of social justice beyond the anthropocentric concerns human world, to embrace non-anthropocentric readings of the Earth, which includes considerations of “planetary (un)sustainability and (un)wellness” ([4], p. 1256). A major epistemic difference between ecopedagogy and most other interpretations of Freirean pedagogy in previous youth work literature, is that ecopedagogy adopts a holistic ecological systems perspective, where humans are viewed as a component of natural systems, whose ultimate welfare is intimately tied to the integrity and welfare of all other parts of

the Earth systems. This differs from the dominant perspectives of the global North on the relationship between humans and Earth, implicit in youth work theory, where humans and human needs have been accorded special status. According to Claros [13] some prominent Judeo-Christian perspectives are anthropocentric, because they use biblical interpretations to argue that the Earth was created for human use and this justifies a view of land, oceans, animals and plants as commodities to be owned, bought and sold by humans for use and profit, however there are alternative traditions within Judeo-Christianity that focus upon stewardship of the Earth, found in the perspectives of ecological liberation theology and ecofeminist theology [3]. Some First Nations perspectives consider that humans *belong* to the country on which they live [14], and have *duties to take care of the country* [15] in ways that benefit all living and non-living entities. The values that underpin the ecopedagogical perspective do not give humans special rights or entitlements in natural systems, and this perspective accords more closely with stewardship and with first people's assumptions about the place of humans in relations to nature.

According to Misiaszek [4], a role of ecopedagogy is to disrupt the "false-truths" that are propagated to support so-called, "common-sense" ideas that distance human wellbeing from Earth wellbeing. A second task is to question all forms of injustice and dominance. This questioning means unlearning knowledges that sustain the domination of nature and of other human beings, through patriarchy and capitalism, which he contends are inherent to the Anthropocene. Instead, various authors suggest that ecopedagogy means embracing Southern epistemologies (and other epistemologies) that centralise humans as part of Earth [16–18]. Thus, ecopedagogy assumes that environmental dominance, human social dominance and violence are inseparable and intermeshed, and Misiaszek contends that both ecological destruction and interpersonal violence must be addressed together. Ecopedagogy also suggests that it is necessary to pay attention to how the concept of "development" is framed, because conventional assumptions about development frame decisions about human development and environmental wellbeing in ways that separate human beings, from other ecological systems [16]. Ecopedagogy by contrast, teaches ecoliteracy to enable connections to be made between ideologies of human hierarchy and domination (such as patriarchy, racism, (neo)coloniality, heteronormativity) and ideologies of dominance over nature [4].

3. Youth Work Theory/Praxis

In many countries, youth work developed a-theoretically as a tacit craft that has only been theorised systematically since the mid-20th century [1]. The sources of theory have been diverse and have crossed many traditions and disciplinary boundaries [19]. In contemporary youth work, two main theoretical approaches predominate. The first involves pedagogies for youth work in which youth work is conceived as an educational activity [20]. Examples of this type of theorisation include the application of Freirean pedagogy to youth work [21] and the application of Dewey's educational theories to youth work [22]. These conceptions position youth work as informal or non-formal education and have been prominent in British-influenced youth work [1,23] and in Irish traditions influenced by Catholic liberation theology [3,24], and variants of these traditions are commonly found in the UK, Australia, and Ireland, as well as in several British Commonwealth countries [20]. A second approach to youth work theorisation was developed based upon social psychological theories, derived particularly from the humanistic psychology described by Adler [25,26] positive psychology lifespan development theories, and Bronfenbrenner's developmental systems theories [25,27]. These theories form the theoretical basis for Positive Youth Development (PYD) approaches [28,29], including Brendtro's Circle of Courage [25,30], and cross-cultural youth work approaches developed in New Zealand [31]. Both these major traditions will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

3.1. Freirean Youth Work

Youth work informed by Freirean pedagogy places importance upon encouraging young people to question their everyday assumptions about the world, their experiences and their place in society [20]. Everyday assumptions about the world are assumptions which young people would normally have accepted as self-evident. Some examples of unquestioned assumptions about the world include social hierarchies such as neocolonialism, wealth hierarchies, the class system, and meritocracy. Other assumptions are that a social hierarchy based upon racism, heterosexism, sexism, and patriarchy is normal and natural, and that capitalism is the only viable economic system. Further examples include that animals and the natural environment are for human benefit and use and that technological innovations are a natural development that is unstoppable and/or beneficial. Youth-work methods have developed to put Freirean pedagogy into practice in the types of informal settings in which youth work occurs [20,32,33]. Youth workers use a variety of methods, including structured activities and opportunistic dialogical conversation, that build upon the interests and concerns that young people raise [32]. In youth work, as in other settings in which Freirean pedagogy is applied, dialogical conversations begin with concerns that arise from the everyday life experiences and concerns of young people. The role of the youth worker is to pose questions that prompt young people to think about familiar problems in unfamiliar ways, and in the process, learners become teachers and teachers become learners [32]. Within youth work, traditionally, Freirean pedagogy has been understood as a method used to develop critical understanding about social justice issues both in the lives of young people and beyond the lives of young people [20].

3.2. Positive Youth Development

Youth work informed by Positive Youth Development (PYD) is found globally, but most commonly in North America, where this approach was schematically developed [34]. Within youth work, traditionally, PYD has been understood as a method that is used to help young people to thrive, despite adverse and unsupportive familial or social environments. Such environments are characterised by violence, neglect, poverty, mental health problems, substance abuse, emotional or sexual abuse, poor parenting, or a lack of educational and employment opportunities. Fundamental to PYD is the idea that the five Cs (character, competence, confidence, connection, and caring) [29] or the seven Cs (character, competence, confidence, connection, caring, contribution, and creativity) [35] are defining features of PYD. PYD occurs when young people develop these characteristics and grow into adults who make a positive contribution to themselves, to others, and to the social institutions in their communities [27,29]. The role of the youth worker is to intervene in young people's lives to provide life experiences that will support young people in gaining these characteristics by applying a developmental assets model [35]. The Circle of Courage (CoC) outlines an alternative approach, which is also based upon developmental principles but takes a different approach to intervention. Similar personal characteristics of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery form the core of the CoC [25,36,37]. The CoC approach is based upon a synthesis of Native American approaches to child rearing and Maslow's hierarchy of needs [25]. The role of youth workers is to modify the social systems around young people (such as their families, peers, and community), to create a psychosocial environment that is more conducive to young people's holistic development. The goal is to help young people to heal their psychosocial wounds and to develop personal responses and resources that will enable them to thrive despite an adverse environment [25].

3.3. Other Youth Work Traditions

There are other approaches to youth work that are not primarily influenced by either the Freirean tradition or by PYD, including pragmatic a-theoretical approaches in which methods and practices develop and are shared without any theoretical rationale, based upon pragmatic judgements about "what works" (or what is believed to work). Three other traditions will be mentioned briefly in this section, but space does not permit a

comprehensive discussion. The first is a “youth services” model of youth work, in which youth workers provide services to meet the perceived needs of young people. The defining feature of these services is that they provide services in “youth-friendly” settings, where there is a focus on building positive and affirming relationships with young people, and if necessary, youth workers mediate between young people and other professionals. Examples include youth-friendly health services, in which medical professionals work alongside youth workers, such as, for example, in the Australian Headspace mental health service, in youth sexual health clinics, or in some youth employment services.

A second example is of embedded youth and community work, in which youth work occurs as part of embedded community development work, where youth and community workers who are part of specific communities work with others in that community to foster improved community autonomy, self-reliance, and self-determination [38]. A third example is provided by the traditional organised learning systems for community life-long learning practiced by First Nations and other oral cultures, which includes work by elders with young people that resembles youth work in some respects (but may not be called that), for example, in Australia [39], or in New Zealand [40,41]. Similarly, in some former colonial countries in Africa, like Ghana, youth workers are reinventing alternative ways of working with young people based on traditional cultural practices [42]. Each of these traditions, and others, deserve further discussion, but we do not have space here to do them justice.

4. Discussion

The discussion now examines in more detail how ecopedagogy highlights the limitations of Freirean youth work and PYD, and to what extent these approaches might change in each tradition to accommodate the perspectives identified by ecopedagogy.

4.1. Ecopedagogy and Freirean Youth Work

When ecopedagogy is compared with Freirean youth work, there are many fundamental compatibilities at the level of theory, because both are based in Freirean pedagogical theory. The approaches differ in terms of scope of focus, where Freirean youth work has been human-focused and ecopedagogy is Earth-focused. To ground Freirean youth work in ecopedagogy would require an adjustment of the scope of the frame of reference. The framing of Freirean youth work would need to change from a focus on social justice to a focus on Earth justice. Social justice is an integral part of Earth justice, but Earth justice includes much more than social justice. For this integration to occur, it is necessary to make one major change to how young people are positioned. The change that is required is to stop giving special status to the needs and wants of young people and people more generally. This may prove ideologically difficult for some youth workers and may seem like a step too far, for some. This change depends upon reframing the relationship of humans to the Earth, such that humans, including young people, are viewed as a part of Earth, instead of separate from Earth. This reframing would have a profound effect on how young people and youth issues would be perceived and analysed and would require continual consideration of the beyond-human effects of actions, decisions, and choices. When questions of social justice become questions of Earth justice, this calls into question existing “taken-for-granted” practices that inform both individual choices and accountability of social institutions and corporations.

An Earth-justice perspective calls into question some tacit assumptions, which youth work does not often engage with. One question concerns consumption and its relationship with happiness and wellbeing. Many people in the (over)developed world take for granted that if they have “more stuff” (or more purchased “experiences”), their lives will be enhanced, and yet research does not support this assumption [43–45], and Dowling & Yap concluded that in very poor countries, effective public health services, rather than income, had the greatest effect on wellbeing [46].

A further question concerns beliefs about technological progress, and unquestioned assumptions that it is beneficial and/or unstoppable and that some adverse social and

environmental effects are unavoidable or will eventually be mitigated. Industry presents the benefits of technologies like ultra-processing of food, social media, air travel, or the internet, and gives little weight to the concomitant drawbacks and adverse effects on the environment or on human or animal health or wellbeing. For example, ultra-processed food is enjoyable to eat, reduces food spoilage, and saves on food preparation time. It is also convenient and produces less waste because it has a longer shelf-life. However, its potential negatives include that a diet of ultra-processed food is unhealthy; contains excessive salt, sugar, and trans-fats, which lead to adverse physical and mental health conditions; is addictive and increases the risk of overeating and obesity; and supports monocrop agriculture (e.g., sugar cane, corn, and intensive factory farming of animals), which is detrimental to the health of the planet and to animals' wellbeing. The food industry heavily promotes the positive characteristics of ultra-processed food. Adverse effects, if mentioned, are dismissed as unfortunate, trivial, and awaiting a future technological–medical resolution. Attempts to regulate ultra-processed foods or food advertising have been resisted by food-industry lobbyists who (as with tobacco) claim that regulation infringes on individuals' rights of choice. From an ecopedagogical perspective, the relationships between developing technologies and social–ecological systems have become important youth issues that should be included within the remit of youth work with young people.

Thirdly, the “industrial military complex” (the network of organisations that produce and sell weapons) lobbies government to provide funds to develop weapons technologies that, if used, have the capacity to destroy humans and ecological systems and to wipe out most of the life on Earth, including human life. From an ecopedagogical youth-work perspective, this should be an important issue. As with processed food, the technological development of weapons is presented as beneficial (to keep us safe from enemies) and/or unstoppable. As with ultra-processed foods, the negative side-effects (conventional environmental destruction, usage of fossil fuels, and risks of sudden nuclear mass extinction) are either minimised or seen as unstoppable, whilst the deterrence effects of weapons stock-piles are actively promoted, and people's concerns about invasion are encouraged. From an ecopedagogical perspective, the “arms race” is an issue with profound ecological risks, and from the same perspective, in a democratic society, youth workers need to be able to discuss this with young people, even though its resolution is beyond their immediate influence.

4.2. Ecopedagogy and PYD

The fundamental assumptions that underpin PYD come from social psychology, which means that theory focuses upon the intrapersonal and the interpersonal relationship of humans with each other and with the social systems around them. Thus, PYD is inherently anthropocentric. An Earth-centric pedagogy (ecopedagogy) does not fit easily within the PYD framework. It would be possible to extend the scope of some of the five Cs (character, competence, confidence, connection, and caring), especially connection (which could refer to a connection to people and nature) and caring (which could become caring for one's country and caring for the environment), but if this extension occurred, it would be harder to relate these to the underlying psychological theories, which position people as separate from Earth and in isolation from Earth systems.

To change from a person-centred systems theory to an Earth-centred systems theory would potentially require replacement of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) [47] with Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory (GST) [48] (or similar). Interestingly, Lerner referenced Bertalanffy's GST in his writing, but chose the anthropocentric focus of Bronfenbrenner EST. The practical implications of GST this would be considerable and would broaden the scope and complexity of PYD. Whereas Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model places individuals at the centre of the human social, institutional, and cultural systems, General Systems Theory views human systems as only a small (and potentially destabilising) element within Earth systems. As with the previous discussion, from a General Systems Theory (GST) perspective, or an ecopedagogical perspective, the needs of young people would no longer be central to decision-making. Instead, the central

value would be stabilising Earth systems. Such a goal is far-removed from the standard concerns of PYD, although not necessarily removed from the goals of young activists pursuing climate justice.

Re-examining the examples discussed in the previous section, from a GST perspective, overconsumption (of material goods or “experiences”) would be analysed in terms of the effects of overconsumption on other Earth systems. This type of analysis has begun to a limited extent, especially with regard to “fast fashion”, but would need to be extended to include both things and experiences; for example, skydiving, whale watching and adventure trips to Antarctica. Analysis would examine the carbon footprint, but also the pollution and the disruption to animals and natural systems more generally. GST might question, for example, whether there can be any justification for visiting Antarctica in person, when it is possible to view high-resolution live image streaming of a quality that would be unimaginable to previous generations. On the question of technology, a GST perspective would invite us to examine the energy consumption of cloud data storage and other digital transactions, which now exceeds the energy consumption of many countries [49]. Finally, from a GST perspective, the adverse multisystemic effects of global technology and the development of mass destruction weapons systems would appear as a highly adverse folly, without any obvious systemic merits. From a systems perspective, wars have inflicted damage on both the “winners” and “losers”, and have reshaped, degraded, or destroyed cultures in ways that were neither anticipated nor welcomed by the protagonists who initiated the conflicts.

4.3. Ecopedagogy and Other Approaches to YW

Applying the insights of ecopedagogy to a youth-services approach to youth work would, at minimum, require an assessment of the systemic effects of youth services on Earth systems. This would require immediate action to address the negative effects and, as has been the case in previous discussions, an acknowledgement that some human wants might need to be sacrificed to maintain Earth’s systems. Similarly, the focus of embedded community development work would need to extend beyond the present focus upon what is beneficial to that community to consider what benefits Earth systems more generally. Such a change of focus would require different methodologies and would radically change practice in ways that some community workers would possibly resist. The third perspective—First Nations knowledge and learning systems—is extensive, and cannot be discussed comprehensively in this article. However, the values that inform Australian First Nations knowledge systems are more compatible with ecopedagogy because of the central belief that people belong to their country and have obligations to care for their country to keep systems healthy. Additionally, Australian First Nations knowledge systems view the Earth systemically over long time-periods and are not based upon the premise of a separation between people and nature.

5. Conclusions

Ecopedagogy integrates relatively easily with Freirean youth work at the level of theory, and Misiaszek [4] claims that Freire was working in this direction in his final works. However, the implications of ecopedagogy for Freirean youth work practice, if fully adopted, would be significant, because ecopedagogy would require that the needs of all Earth systems be considered as the highest priority, or at least as a higher priority, alongside which the wants and needs of young people would need to fit. This concurs with what many young climate activists have been calling for but differs markedly from the orientation of contemporary youth work practice.

It would be more difficult to integrate ecopedagogy with PYD at a theoretical level because of the overtly anthropocentric nature of underlying theory. Potentially, if the Circle of Courage approach re-emphasised and fully integrated native American cultural values (or in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori values) this may produce a better fit. This could provide a pathway towards the adaptation of theory and practice to change thinking

about the relationship between young people and Earth, so young people would come to view themselves as integrally part of the natural world, instead of separate from the natural world. However, this would be in tension with the current orientation of PYD within individual and social psychology and towards accommodation to a market-driven capitalist economic system.

Whilst ecopedagogy may theoretically integrate with Freirean-inspired community development and community education, it does not align easily with other forms of community development. For example, in many communities, exploitative perspectives on the natural environment (i.e., that it is there for human use) are normalised. People tacitly assume human wants and needs are more important than consequences for other species or ignore consequences that are not immediately visible. Community workers may raise the importance of natural environment to human quality of life, but this only partially addresses the claims of ecopedagogy, as this approach still prioritises human needs and is therefore anthropocentric. By contrast, at first sight, ecopedagogy appears to integrate readily with some First People's worldviews that humans are an integral part of nature, whose fate is tied up with the care of the natural systems in which they live. These cultures have values that emphasise the adverse natural consequences that will arise from taking unsustainably from the environment, which will be punished through the natural consequences of local ecological collapse.

In summation, this article has examined how ecopedagogy might critique and add to different strands of youth work theory and practice. The authors acknowledge that this discussion has not focused upon the potential limitations of ecopedagogy, and it was not the intention of this article to suggest that ecopedagogy should replace other theoretical approaches to youth work. The limitations of ecopedagogy as a basis for youth work would require a different analysis. Ecopedagogy offers insights into how youth workers might adapt their practice to address ecological concerns. At the very minimum, and as a first step, all forms of youth work could routinely incorporate an assessment of environmental impacts into their risk-management audits when planning programmes and activities. More comprehensively, Freirean youth work could consider how far to move towards an ecopedagogical model which centralises Earth justice alongside or instead of social justice. PYD could examine to what extent the underpinning theory extends out from Bronfenbrenner's EST towards Bertalanffy's GST.

Finally, if youth work wants to embrace ecopedagogy, much could be learnt from understanding the values that inform indigenous people's knowledge systems, especially those of Australian First Nations, which is the oldest continuous culture, and has been sustained in an ecologically fragile natural environment for over 60,000 years. Such a dialogue would need to be approached with humility on the part of the non-First Nations would-be learners who would need to unlearn conventional assumptions before re-learning alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and being.

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