

ReFocus Journal

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single article extract:
Elemental Experiences.

ReFocus Journal is available from www.sightlines-initiative.com.

Other articles focussing on 'being and learning outdoors' and 'pedagogical development' also appear in other issues.

ReFocus is the UK network of early childhood educators, artists and others influenced in their practice by the preschools of Reggio Emilia

Elemental Experiences

The messages of Sticks and Stones: working with the stuff of things

If we are receptive, our places of early childhood learning can easily be places which celebrate the stuff of the world, places where children can encounter and re-encounter things, ideas; be in fascination. If we dare to clear out the commercial clutter, we can house material which is infinitely richer, which connects with the simplest and most complex structures and forces of the world, and is free.

SO WHAT IS IT that lies all around us? We do seem to persist in being able not to know. It's not primary colours or catalogue kits designed to teach packaged arbitrary and sanitised concepts and maximise profits: sticks, leaves, feathers, shells, clay, water, wood, wool, stones; air; fire, just the real ordinary and extraordinary, simple, complex and wonderful stuff that is the elemental material of the world.

The Q'ero people of the Andean mountains call stones 'the bones of the earth': stones are not just stones. The stone connects with the bigger reality of their home, the apus (mountains), the gods. In our country too it has been the same. The indigenous peoples of the UK, 5000 years ago, valued highly the beautiful, polished axes produced in the remote and wondrous craggy cloud-country of the Langdale Pikes in Cumbria. They could have made their tools from the same quality stone which was found more easily elsewhere, but the mountains spoke powerfully, just as they do today. Stones are not just stones. Sticks are not just lumps of stuff, they bring with them the character and nature of the trees they are from, the individuality of their place of growth and life.

An ancestral view down Langdale Valley



This awareness of material and the sense of the importance of connection with the stuff of life is found in Steiner Kindergartens, but I'm not talking about 'doing Steiner', just the importance, potential and richness of making way for all this wonderful primary and real material from which imagination springs.

In our nurseries, do we absolutely need plastic plates in our home corners? Why do we do that? For that matter, why do we have home corners? How about a simply resourced area of big blocks for structures, cloths to make walls and niches, with some beautifully sliced seasoned logs that could represent plates if they are called upon by the children to do so, and not if not? We know that play is much richer, and communication more intense, when the children invest, share and agree their own meanings.

For building and construction areas why not use blocks from seasoned birch, hazel, beech, with stones of beautiful shades and varieties; for pattern-making and arranging, feathers, shells, stones, pebbles, beachcombed glass?



Hazel material ready for exploration at South Tyneside Early Excellence Centre



Photos: Kath Beddingfield

Elemental materials invite connection and relationships with the world, as well as being open, infinitely richer, and with more variety than commercial playthings.



Photos: Solveig Morris

Arrangements by nursery children at Conway Primary School, Greenwich Local Authority

So this is a call for celebrating mud and good companionship. I'd like to make an invitation: let's make settings places of elemental materials, elemental encounter; really listening as we recognise and support children in their voyages of encounter. Our foundations are of the earth and the elements; we need to assist our children's connection with that which is most naturally and fundamentally fascinating.

Looking through the window from where I'm writing, the wind has blown the last leaf off the old lime tree, and is rattling the windows; the sun has moved round and, on the floor, amongst stones gathered from mountains and rivers around the world, mica glistens. I recall a river from the wilds of Kejimikujik, Nova Scotia, which cascades past my chair. Then, another image: an English primary school, primary colours, primary shapes, festooned with hearty alphabets, numbers, primary directives, worksheets to maximise attainment and add value, jigsaws for relaxation and instruction. The spectral river shrinks back across the globe into Kejimikujik Lake. Sometimes it is easy to forget the simple things, but the messages from the elements can remind us.



Walkergate children encountering mud at the countryside centre

Mud and good companionship

'Hey! We just realised how absolutely brilliant mud is.' The educators at Walkergate Early Years Centre had been venturing into a woodland preschool experience last summer and, of course, during the four introductory sessions mud had been

a big feature. The 'mud-ludder' children jump and squelch in it, getting stuck, feeling it, moulding it, churning it, finding worms.

This is all part of the lovely mix of exploring, climbing, collecting, dens, sticks. Sticks, living, dead, dry, wet, brittle, rotten, strong, long, for helping, carrying, building, sticks with fungus on, sociable sticks, power sticks. Sticks, limbs from the trees they were playing amongst, in the mud, down where the mud monster scared and fascinated them and was their friend and mystery. And leaves, and pine-cones, feathers, all with their insistent tales of mystery and imagination, waiting to be picked up, interpreted, re-told, re-invented, with a deftness of curiosity which connects the children to one another and with the world all around them.

Back at nursery, lucky children, they explore again inside and outside with clay, soil, compost, in the natural and vibrant ways of exploration and exchange they'd naturally moved with in the woods.



Re-encountering mud back at nursery

20 June 2006, outside at Walkergate nursery

KYLE 'It's like pooh! Yuk!'

COURTNEY 'I'm digging some mud out.'

LAURA 'Look, mud, its just like powder.'

KYLE 'I'm going to get some more water.'

COURTNEY 'I'll make a big hole for the water.'

JOE 'I can splash in it, you know. You do it Courtney. Watch this!'

COURTNEY 'So am I.'

LAURA (filling bucket with water and mud) 'I'm putting mud in it. It feels soggy. Look at my pudding.'

KYLE 'So am I. Joe come and fill it up with me.'

COURTNEY 'It's a pond. I'm making a pudding too.'

Why lucky? They had good companions, who made time and space for them, their interests and the mud. It isn't always the case that adults in education are ready, willing and able to see and respond to the simple enthusiasm of their children.

Michael's fascination

Autumn 1987. Michael is by himself, outside at nursery, looking at the leaves in the elder trees. As the teacher outside, I observe from a distance. Some leaves are ready to fall; some have already fallen. Michael touches one and it comes off; and another. He tries to put it back into place, but it doesn't go. Suddenly he runs back into nursery. He swiftly re-emerges with the tape dispenser, I guess he's 'sneaked it', runs to the trees and starts fixing the leaves back.

He was exploring some deep and enduring themes; it's easy to guess at them. What did I do? Nothing – well, not quite – I did notice; I didn't shout at him to 'take the tape back where it belongs', and I made sure no-one else did. (Unfortunately, it was a real prospect at the time.) What if I'd shared it then and there that evening with nursery colleagues (rather than now, nine years hence), and to consider how we might celebrate and support Michael's enquiry; his engagement and wonder? This is what our colleagues at Walkergate have learnt to do with the mud back at nursery.

Inside connected with outside

Our children spend too much time inside, separated from the world, but nevertheless the domestic shelter of the classroom is a good place, so long as it relates to the primary experience and stuff of the world. Space outside, whether woodland or nursery garden, seems to be the place for relationships, exchange, delving and exploration, it is after all the elemental home. The inside space, the classroom, seems more the place of reflection, recall and imagination, alongside the sensory encounter with materials. Here materials have a life away from their home, in this artificial, domestic, studio space.

20 June 2006, inside the nursery at Walkergate: clay and water play:

COURTNEY 'Ugh! Squelchy. There was a pond at the park there was mud squelching all over the place and I got stuck in it. I'm squeezing it. I like it – it's like muddy puddles.'

JESSICA 'It's all hard – ow. I'm gonna mess it up.' (covers hands with clay) look, where's my skin gone?'

PAIGE 'I'm making it slidy. It's nice and softy. I'm making holes. Its soggy and wet!'

CAITLIN 'Ooh its gooey! I like to get messy. I like this – its fun.'

HANNAH 'Its like dog pooh! Here Caitlin here's some dog pooh for you! I'm making a dicky-bird house and a swing and a high chair.'

ABIGAIL 'I'm making mud burgers.'

LAUREN 'It feels like some sausages.'

LEWIS 'It's squashy.'

All nicely mixed up with the immediacy of the sliding, gooey, messy fun is reflection, remembrance of the primary experiences outside, and making. We need to continually meet with these materials, the stuff of earth, wind, water, fire, with an open-hearted spirit of enquiry. This is an attitude which is beyond usefulness, functionalism and problem-solving.

Supporting Fascination and Wonder

In 1956, Rachel Carson wrote,

'If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, mystery and excitement of the world we live in.'

Of course we know the deep effects of the bad, delimiting companionship of scared and impatient adults: 'come down from there you might fall!', 'come inside it's going to rain!' etc etc. The mantle of fear and danger settles on the children like a sooty film of diesel grime as they run in, get down. It clings to muscles, spines and memories. But if we can wash off some of the grime – it's not that hard, as the folk at Walkergate Early Years Centre, and countless others are showing – and look at the difference: adults actively listening; making environments of encounter.

Adult good companionship might not be necessary to keep alive a sense of wonder (and we are usually pretty good at recognising the companions who are 'good') but it sure makes a difference. 'Exploring nature with your child', said Rachel Carson, 'is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils and fingertips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression.'

Here is Linda, the environmental educator with the Walkergate group, 'The mud looks and sounds great today. It's shiny and soft, it grabs wellies and sucks them down. It sounds like it is eating a delicious ice-cream as children walk through it and it squelches. It has been churned to a perfect consistency by the children's wellies tramping through it.'



A sunbeam shoots unexpectedly through a dense elder bush, piercing its dense shade where one of the group is playing. She senses it and looks up. 'Look, look! The tree's on fire!'
Redesdale Woodland Preschool, 2001

Being there

Working with elemental materials thins down our dangerous adult cultural separateness from the living, sentient world and brings the possibility of a better understanding and alignment in our children. There is an inborn

sense of wonder, an easy and rewarding sense to nurture.

This is not simply a matter of stuff, it is a matter of speed and intent. Tasks, goals and achievement need repetitiveness, efficient ways of doing things; lowest-common-denominator simplicity.

Enquiry needs fascination and engagement; a different understanding of time. The point is not to get somewhere else, but to be exactly where you are, switching on senses, thoughts and feelings. To be good companions with children, we need to rekindle, to cultivate in ourselves, the habit of walking in the unknown – and listening. Carlina Rinaldi refers to a pedagogy of listening: listening not to what we expect or even seek, but to what is, what we see; to listen to ourselves listening. Sometimes we are encouraged to 'think outside the box' but can we more courageously learn to be aware that the box itself is a figment of our imagining: it does not really exist at all anyway. Step out of the box, walk a few paces, turn around – pam!: the box simply isn't there any more. Can we notice the complexities of the forest instead; learn to live and be amongst them?

'At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

JOHN KEATS, IN A LETTER TO HIS BROTHER, 1817

Can we educators learn to cultivate this being in uncertainty as part of cultivating a habit, culture, pedagogy of listening; to encourage in children this natural sense of enquiry in which thought, feelings and senses are passionately engaged in 'warm research.' We talk of 'researching the children who are researching the world.' We need to be ready and to make our places ready for this researchfulness.

We need, in many ways, to get off the beaten path, to walk off the track and into the woods. It took me years to walk off the track, to remember, to decide to let my feet follow inclination, to dare. But once you walk into the woods, wait and let the woods come to you. It is not a matter of being lost but of being there, being in uncertainty. I do not mean being tremulous, indecisive, lost, fearful, and I can't see that Keats meant this. It is being ready to listen well, without needing to explain or dissect, to be 'in tune', so that senses naturally attune to the patterns, the orders, intricacies and relationships of the world, just as the tools of our senses themselves are patterned, rhythmic, intricate, animate and interrelated. We are ourselves, animated, vibrant, rhythmic, sensual preceptors, perceiving and related to other animated, vibrant, rhythmic, sensual presences around us.

I think that this is one of the things that Malaguzzi meant, in saying, 'Listen, and if you have listened well, perhaps teaching will be different than before.' I think this is something of the vital 'sense of wonder' of which Rachel Carson speaks, and which we cannot have if we separate ourselves from sticks, leaves, feathers, shells, clay, water, wood, wool, stones ... or from air, mountains, woods, rivers, fields, seas...

Making this simple path

We need to be slow; we need to be reflective; we need to be aware and systematic; we need to be evidential; we need to work well: I am not advocating simply standing back, wide-eyed and hopeful.

I know it isn't easy, I know how hard it can be. In our houses of education, the voice of Gradgrind, Dickens' dark lord of utility and purpose, still resounds loudly: worried educators breathlessly bustle around, fixing things up, putting children in order and marshalling time so that the necessary facts can be taught in the shortest possible time.

With Gradgrind still around, it can be hard for us educators to conjure and create educative places in which enquiry, engagement and imagination lead the way. Sometimes it's hard to imagine such a thing. The government ring-binders, inevitably, weigh heavily. "Curricular targets need to be addressed through all areas of learning, and opportunities to teach, practice and embed the curricular targets need to be identified through all areas of the FS curriculum" (Primary National Strategy 2006).

However, I do think there are simple, humane starting points from which to imagine and create educative spaces in which children can explore and learn in joyful, vibrant, meaningful ways. Even if we need to keep at bay the leaden sound of the embedding of curricular targets. I am talking about focussing on making places and encounters which speak of the pulsing of life: places which celebrate the encounter with the stuff of the world.

Robin Duckett is Director of Sightlines Initiative following ten years as a nursery teacher. He is at home in sun and rain, woods and mountains.

References and further reading

- Bateson, G. (1979) *Mind and Nature: a Necessary Unity* Dutton (quoted by Vea Vecchi in Theater Curtain)
Carson, R. (1988) *The Sense of Wonder* Harper Collins (see book review in this edition of ReFocus Journal)
Langdale image: www.stridingedge.net
Louv, R. (2005) *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder* Algonquin Books (a passionate exposé of the current cultural tendency towards separation)

