Dialogues with Nature: air, earth, water, fire

Reviewed by Liz Battersby

What a privilege it was to attend the Dialogues in Nature seminar on 31 August presented by Claire Maley-Shaw, Head Teacher of Fiordland Kindergarten and Pam Wilson, Senior Teacher at Southland Kindergarten Association, Invercargill. Claire and Pam’s expertise in creating an outstanding “wild nature” learning experience for children and their love and respect for these children shone through. It is not surprising that Claire’s beautiful book about the Nature Discovery programme she runs for the children at Fiordland Kindergarten sold out rapidly. I would recommend this book to all teachers wishing to develop their own “environment as the third teacher” programme, especially one in which children can experience being in wild nature over a sustained period of time.

Claire and Pam’s descriptions of their own childhoods spent roaming freely in nature triggered my own intense childhood memories of exploring our local magical park complete with river, canal, woods, golf course (great for tobogganing in a snowy winter), and copious wildlife – an environment overflowing with possibilities for our Swallows and Amazons adventures. How dull school was in comparison!

Claire and Pam’s approach has seen the meticulous crafting of a programme that ensures that wild nature is a magnificent context for learning, in which children can share discoveries, develop trust in one another and become a unified team, learning from, with and about their environment and each other. Through the programme the children have freedom and space to explore the environment, develop a well-informed, pragmatic yet wonder-filled view of nature, come to care deeply for and have a sense of ownership of their environment, and develop both personal and interpersonal skills. The children’s growing resilience, their sense of awe and delight in exhilarating encounters and risk-taking were superbly captured in the exquisite photographs Claire and Pam shared. It was most touching to hear their stories about particular children for whom life itself could be a challenge, but whose personal development through the programme was profound.

While Claire and Pam are inspired by the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia and the Forest Schools, they have created their own approach – one that supports and reflects their belief in the crucial need for today’s children to experience a sustained and meaningful nature programme, in which they can develop a strong connection to the land. The programme references Te Whariki, sound research and informed opinions from such experts as Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods (2005). Louv boldly, but accurately states, “The child in Nature is an endangered species, and the health of children and the health of the Earth are inseparable.” (Quoted in: Maley-Shaw, Claire, Nature Discovery, Kindergartens South, 2013).

Claire described the social times spent around the fire as a beautiful part of the day. It is a time when food is prepared and shared and the children’s ideas are listened to, valued and explored. Stories around the fire are an ancient tradition, part of what has sustained us as humans for centuries, and the chance these children have to hear and create their own shared narrative and stories
while “being in nature” is significant to their development as individuals and social beings.

As well as ensuring that the children experience a meaningful, captivating learning programme, the Nature Discovery programme enhances teachers’ pedagogy and involves parents, families and the wider community. Indeed, some fathers, in particular, thrive on this opportunity to connect with their children in an environment in which they feel at ease.

Claire and Pam ensure that the elements of air, earth, water and fire present no obstacles to the joys of exploring the environment. Practical steps are taken to equip the children for all weather, enhancing their ability to embrace wild nature and the unique features of every season. Nature provides its own atelier, where the children can create, make objects, count and write if they wish.

The success of the Nature Discovery programme reflects the strong Image of the Child held by Claire, Pam and their teachers - an image of the child supported by that of David Ingvar, formerly Professor of Neurophysiology at the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm. Ingvar asserts, “It is necessary to be outside for our brains to be stimulated from the flow of sound, light, shapes and colours that nature provides. Especially between the ages of 3-6 when the energy flow in the human brain is at its greatest.” (Quoted in: Maley-Shaw, Claire, Nature Discovery, Kindergartens South, 2013).

Claire and Pam’s young children will have rich memories of investigations and experiences of being in nature; the kind of memories so beautifully captured by the 19th Century American poet, Walt Whitman in his poem There Was a Child Went Forth, quoted from here:

“The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs, and the sow’s pink-faint litter, and the mare’s foal and the cow’s calf,
And the noisy brood of the barn-yard, or by the mire of the pond-side,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there – and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water plants with their beautiful flat heads – all became part of him.”

Without doubt, the Nature Discovery programme will become part of its children as they investigate nature through a hundred languages, and perhaps, as Loris Malaguzzi would have hoped, “a hundred, hundred more.”