

International Association Nature Pedagogy Conference 2017

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As a recipient of the 2017 Kate O'Driscoll scholarship I was able to attend the *Nature Pedagogy Conference*. A global 2 day conference held in Adelaide which allowed me to further investigate the positive outcomes connecting with nature & learning outdoors has on our students. Although I have been teaching outdoors for the past 5 years, attending this conference reinforced what I have always believed. Being outdoors enhances student and teacher learning and wellbeing.

There were 4 key note speakers.

Claire Warden is a leading educator, consultant and advocate in Nature Pedagogy. She has over 20 years experience in teaching young children outdoors. Claire discussed many of the positive outcomes we see in children when they spend time outdoors. Some of these include increase in physical health, cognitive functioning and self control, affiliation and imaginative play and affiliation with other species and the natural world. Children's stress levels fall within minutes of seeing green spaces. Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility and they are sick less often. In nature based & outdoor pedagogy integration flows in a way like in no other setting and often we see spontaneous social collaboration.

Doug Fargher is the founder of Westgarth Bush Kinder. He has been taking children & their families out into a bush setting since 2011. Learning in outdoor environments has been shown to support and enrich the lives of many children and families in a way conventional education has not. The evidence from around the world informs us that teaching in a natural space benefits children who have a diverse range of needs. In addition, nature can provide an inclusive environment for families and groups themselves isolated in more traditional settings.

Adam Bienenstock is a playground designer and consultant. He shared his knowledge regarding how the outdoors is a springboard for learning. This is especially true when designing and building a natural playground that is pedagogically sound. A well planned outdoor space needs to engage all the senses provide opportunities for risk benefit analysis and follow good design principles, while at the same time supporting a child's creative, cognitive, language, social and gross motor skills.

Wendy Lee shared some of the ways in which teachers are capturing the influential nature of the outdoors as crucial, rich, learning environments. She discussed the power of learning stories

I attended several workshops. These included "Igniting a curiosity for fire." During this workshop we explored the conceptual knowledge and practical skill needed to teach students about the benefits, risks and opportunities that fire brings. We learnt how to safely start and keep a fire going, along with learning the practical uses of fire including cooking and charcoal making, explored possible lines of enquiry and linking in with the Australian Curriculum.

Wendy Gorman discussed the role the educator plays ensuring the links between the learning outside the classroom and beyond, to the learning inside the classroom. This link is essential to the provision of a high quality program. *The educator listens, watches, shares interests, ask questions, scaffolds investigations, play and plans to link the learning from outside to the classroom inside.* (Wynne and Gorman, 2015, p12) Case studies were shared expanding on how educators link the curriculum, develop dispositions for learning and extend children's thinking across a variety of wild spaces.

Our Way of Learning was presented by Wendy Lotter, a community Elder from the Yuin nation. Through Wendy's workshop I gained a deeper understanding of the 8 Ways of Learning framework. We explored how language, narrative and stories can assist educators to understand the history of their local area and build relationships with the children and families they work with. Wendy shared many practical examples of how she incorporates the elements of the 8 Ways of Learning when working with families and children.

Now what?

On a whole school level, I was fortunate enough to spend one day a week over 2 terms, supporting all teachers to teach literacy outdoors. Over this time, I witnessed teachers' confidence grow as they began delivering lessons outdoors. I regularly asked children how they felt whilst learning outside. Many reported feeling calm, happy, they found it easier to focus, enjoyed looking at the trees or plants when trying to think. Quite a high number of students preferred learning outdoors because it was quieter and "just better". Teachers reported that they often felt calmer outdoors, and a high number of their students appeared highly engaged. Some students produced their best work when they worked outdoors.

Teachers embraced teaching outdoors there was a One teacher continues teaching outdoors most days. She incorporated bike riding, running, hoop jumping and whole class running games into her Letters and Sounds program.

There was a wide range of teacher's comfort levels skill set, risk taking

Another teaching team spent 3 terms investigating a part of our school bush land and developed a strong connection to the frog bog. The students researched fauna and flora, wrote to local politicians and businesses, received a grant and held a photo exhibition sharing their learning journey. As part of their "Acknowledgement of Country" investigation they published a book for the wider school community discussing how to care for the frog bog.

I have taken my Kinder class to our school bush on a regular basis for the past 5 years. However, after attending the conference I made it a weekly occurrence. We spend at least 4 hours a week, regardless of the weather out in the bush. I also strive to spend at least 80% of our time outdoors on our non bush kinder days. I have seen behavioural issues decrease, increased resilience, more complex play, high student engagement and a strong social cohesion with my Kinder class this year. Their connection to place and stewardship is reflected in the interactions they have with the outdoors and each other and is evident within their stories and in their creations.

