ENCYCLOPEDIA
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Development

Indigenizing Outdoor Play

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples have thrived on the land now called Canada, since time immemorial. Many cultures and distinct peoples took shape over this time, all intimately tied in co-evolution with land. Nature remains integral to Indigenous systems across the country – encompassing those of languages, politics, governance, and of course, education and childrearing. Through colonization, these systems encountered new ones, intrinsic to Euro-Western cultures. There are fundamental differences of worldview between Indigenous and European cultures, values, practices, and actions.[1] Understandings of outdoor learning and play are no exception. There is much to learn from Indigenous perspectives on outdoor play, perspectives that are rooted in the very places that all children play today.

Subject

No matter the culture or place, early learning discourses are filled with references to children's laughter, fun, and curiosity when playing outdoors. Play is human nature, and through history, Indigenous children spent much time immersed in play, exploring, splashing, digging and wandering where the outdoors and adventures awaited them. As Indigenous scholar, Kathy

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Absolon expresses:[2]

“Searching was [also] central to my experience in the bush. I spent most of my childhood to young adulthood in the bush. The absence of fences, neighbors and physical boundaries led way for the natural curiosities of a child to grow and be nurtured. My curious nature ushered me to find my way in the bush.”

Internationally, the different Indigenous cultures have as many ways to express being ‘in the bush’ as there are Indigenous approaches to outdoor play. These vary from speaking about being ‘on the land,’ ‘on country,’ ‘in the forest,’ as well as ‘nature-based experiences’.[3,4] Indigenous worldviews tend to place humans as part of nature, in reciprocal relationship with other animals, plants, rocks, water, and ecosystems. When time spent in nature is part of everyday living and learning, it becomes a wide-ranging and inclusive experience - as diverse as life itself. Even before children can walk, they engage in play using all of their senses in nature. Dene Elders and knowledge keepers express that time must also be protected for play while on the land for life-long learning:[5]

“Parents and Elders allow play at the same time as teaching. A child's own play and curiosity lend themselves well to teaching opportunities. Elders believe that play is essential to learning."

Problems

These Indigenous traditional settings with the natural opportunities for children to experience being outdoors seem to have been displaced from mainstream learning, as Euro-Western approaches have dominated the public education system in Canada. In these contemporary approaches to early learning, children are often corralled and controlled by well-meaning adults into set time limits and environments, usually consisting of bright colourful play structures, rather than in natural settings where the land is the “classroom” and the mud, insects, and trees are the “teachers.” As Herrington, Brunelle, & Brussoni describe the modern emphasis on health and safety, risk aversion, and fixed playgrounds are having:[6]

“an unfortunate and unintended effect [on the] creation of outdoor play spaces that consist of primarily equipment rather than natural play elements – what landscape researcher Helen Woolley calls Kit, Fence, Carpet, or KFC.[7] These KFC spaces are rated as having the fewest opportunities for play compared to play spaces incorporating natural elements and risk-taking.”

We have overstructured our environments through the evolution of the Western system. With these shifts in play spaces during the past century and into the new 21st century, many concerns have arisen related to the development of children's agency, happiness and well-being. Casey describes that children's sense of identity, connection to community, social relations, contact with natural environments, and physical growth are being negatively impacted due to the many parameters that impinge upon children's outdoor play.[8] These parameters deny Indigenous worldviews of children as part of the environment.

Research Context

There appears to be a high need in the outdoor play scholarship to consider Indigenous research that respects and honours the child in his natural learning and growth patterns, rather than to focus so adamantly on what adults deem important. Knowledge keepers and Elders who contributed to the NWT Indigenous curriculum shared their perspective:[9]

Among the Dene, it is said that the child is born with integrity. The child has worth. It is the birthright of the Dene child to be acknowledged and respected for this. The child who is not respected cannot become what it is meant to be… [that is] a capable person.

Key Research Questions

With this Indigenous worldview to guide the thinking on children's birthrights towards becoming capable people that are integrated in their environments, can Indigenizing approaches provide a more balanced approach to developing practices, programs and policies that impact children's growth and development in outdoor play?

Recent Research Results

Inuit advocate and educator, Rowan argues that Indigenous ways of knowing and being are essential for children's outdoor learning.[10] She speaks of thinking with land, water and ice, allowing access to Indigenous, and more specifically Inuit approaches, when planning and delivering land-based experiences. She describes her outdoor learning activity with preschool children, an Elder-educator, and staff going out on the land to search for avaalaqiat (willow branches) to prepare branch backpacks. The pedagogy of such outdoor excursions is grounded in a worldview focusing on knowing and experiencing. "These dual elements are tukisiumaniq, which means building understanding or making meaning in life; and silatuniq, which means

experiencing the world". Together they bring forth the essence of outdoor play and learning. These Indigenizing elements of outdoor play add depth by making sense of the natural world that surrounds children. Cree scholar, Michael Hart adds:[11]

"It can be said [Indigenous] knowledge is holistic, personal (subjective), social (dependent upon inter-relations), and highly dependent upon local ecosystems. It is also intergenerational, incorporates the spiritual and physical, and heavily reliant on Elders to guide its development and transmission."

Research Gaps

Although beneficial in its approach, Indigenizing early learning and outdoor play epistemologies and perspectives present only limited appearance in the Euro-Western dominated scholarship. Warden shares:[12]

In terms of research into outdoor learning, the consideration of indigenizing pedagogies is minimal, with more emphasis being placed on UK and Scandinavian research into land-based experiences in wilder spaces. Carruthers, Den Hoed and Spoel (cited in[12]) state, 'Aboriginal people have been offering sophisticated, land-based education to their children for millennia.'

This limited presence in the Eurocentric literature is in large part due to the fact that written literature comes from Eurocentric systems. To bridge this gap, it becomes incumbent on Indigenous researchers and leaders to contribute to the scholarship on Indigenizing outdoor play in the early learning discourses in order to consider a more naturalistic approach to children's growth, development and learning. It is equally important for non-Indigenous researchers and educators to recognize that knowledge comes in many forms, and will be accessed differently when Indigenizing outdoor play. Using an ethical space, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators can share a working relationship where values, worldviews and knowledge co-exist respectfully and guide decision making, policy and practice.[1]

Conclusions

When Indigenous children participate in outdoor play, they will experience the gifts of Indigeneity, as they develop their ways of knowing, being, doing and believing. And all children, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, will feel a sense of belonging in the place where they learn to play together, as they tap into cultures, practices and worldviews of the Indigenous peoples and

lands. Indigenous based philosophies and approaches need to be honoured and acknowledged, and be an integral part of the policy development voice as it relates to outdoor play.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Caregivers and early childhood educators need to pay attention to the many powerful features of Indigenous knowledge across the nations, which can enhance children's learning over the continuum of education. With Indigenous knowledge guiding outdoor play pedagogy, practices and policy, children will gain the exposure to understanding elements of Indigeneity, such as the holistic development of not only their minds, but also their bodies, hearts, and spirits as they experience the outdoors. They may also experience that when learning is personal and relational while facilitated on the land with Elders, knowledge keepers, and extended cultural families, they can begin to understand the ecosystem around them. Moreover, by focusing on Indigenizing outdoor play, children can experience the energy and medicines of the land, along with place-based stories, circle learning, ceremonies, language, and the cultural and spiritual teachings of Elders and Knowledge keepers. Connecting with Indigenous cultures means connecting with land through many dimensions.

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