

NOTE OF REFLECTION

The Essence of Our Collective Work

Ruth Wilson

Consulting Editor

“Telos” may not be a word commonly used in daily conversations, but the idea behind it is something I think about almost every day. Telos – sometimes described as the essence of things – is what I had on my mind as a mule deer and I made eye contact during a hike in the Sandia Mountains yesterday. The deer seemed to be sizing me up – Who was I? Was I a threat? What was I doing in its territory? I, too, was asking questions – How does this deer survive in the desert? Where does it find water? Is it afraid of me? I was trying to get a better understanding of the deer, a glimpse into its telos. Perhaps it was trying to do the same of me. Today, I think about telos in relation to early childhood environmental education (ECEE). Who are we? What is our purpose?

I’ve been involved in ECEE for almost 25 years and sometimes still ask, “What’s it all about?” That’s where “telos” comes into the picture. Aristotle believed that everything has a purpose or final end. He called this its “telos” and said that if we want to understand what something is, it must be described or understood in terms of its end or purpose. I now ask, what is the telos of early childhood environmental education? Is it the wellbeing of children or the wellbeing of the natural world? It can be both, of course, but is that its telos?

As I see it, ECEE is more than the integration or intersection of early childhood education and environmental education. I’m not sure what that “more” is, but I think it’s something that merits consideration.

My work in ECEE started in the early 1990’s while teaching at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. I taught courses in early childhood special education. My focus was on enhancing the learning experiences and lives of young children with special needs. I felt positive interactions with nature were critical to the holistic development of children, yet I saw little opportunities for such interactions in early childhood education programs. I set out to change this.

My goal was to inspire and support teachers in connecting children with nature. I based my work on the understanding that nature-related experiences could foster a sense of wonder, and that wonder was a foundation for learning. I also believed that nature and the wonder it engendered were, as Rachel Carson said, “an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”

I looked to the Environmental Studies program at the university and the Ohio Environmental Education Fund for support in integrating early childhood education and environmental education. My ideas were met with some skepticism. The director of the Environmental Studies program asked about the content of what we would be teaching young children – “What can you teach little kids – the sources of energy?” And a reviewer of grants for the Ohio Environmental Education Fund commented, “I’m not sure we should be funding preschool projects. Isn’t preschool just babysitting?” In spite of the skepticism, the project I proposed was funded.

Many of the early childhood teachers I worked with welcomed the idea of incorporating nature into their programs; others were more hesitant. Some teachers expressed concern about not knowing enough about nature themselves to teach it to children; others felt their curriculum was already full, with room for nothing else.

Funding for my project included the purchase and review of related print and non-print materials – curriculum guides, activity books, videos, etc. I found that there were very few such resources available. There was also a scarcity of other types of resources such as guidelines, professional networks, and related research. At the time, even the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) had no publications and offered few, if any, conference sessions or seminars focusing on young children. For those of us interested in ECEE, it was a lonely world. At one point, I did discover a network of early childhood educators in Australia focusing on environmental education for the very young. My contacts with them proved to be inspiring and helpful.

My focus, at first, was on working with teachers in early childhood education settings. I was soon contacted, however, by educators in nonformal settings (nature centers, zoos, and children's museums). Some of them were already working with preschoolers but were struggling with how to meet the needs of young children.

So what we had until recently was early childhood education without the environmental component and environmental education without the knowledge and skills needed for working with young children. I saw that integrating the two fields would offer advantages to both, so that became my focus.

I'm excited and pleased with the many developments in ECEE that have occurred over the past 20 – 25 years. There's no doubt that we've come a long way, and this is cause for celebration. Yet, I sometimes sense that there is more to come – that the “next big thing” may be right around the corner if we can keep the momentum going. We have guidelines, resources, model programs, and networks. We even have some impressive research supporting the positive impact of our work. But are we clear about the potential, the ultimate purpose, the telos?

We currently have two fields working together in a type of partnership, which includes a healthy sharing of information, ideas, and resources. One image that comes to mind is the holding of hands – suggesting a “we're in this together” approach. We also have the image of hands holding the Earth. This image suggests to me that the Earth – with all its beauty and wonder – is the focus of our efforts. This is a beautiful image, but I wonder, does the purpose of ECEE go beyond sustainability of the planet? Many of us have strong feelings about education for sustainability; but we also believe in education for peace and justice and respect for the rights of children. Is there a way to make these concerns a part of who we are?

A Code of Ethics developed by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) calls on early childhood educators to “work with children to help them understand that they are global citizens with shared responsibilities to the environment and humanity.” This statement, I believe, can provide some guidance on how to expand our thinking about who we are and who we might become, especially in its emphasis on both the environment and humanity.

We often base our work in ECEE on the understanding that what we do is good for children and good for the Earth. The NAAEE *Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence* reflects this dual focus, and related research supports our endeavors. Is it now time to ask where we go from here? Of course, we want more research on the effectiveness of what we do, more resources on how to best implement the guidelines we have in place, and more dissemination of information both within and without the field of education.

Perhaps we should consider going beyond what we sometimes accept as descriptions of environmental education (EE) and early childhood education (ECE)? EE, we sometimes say, is “education in, for, and about the environment.” Today, we also use the term “education for sustainability” to emphasize the importance of building a sustainable society – that is, a society that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Early childhood education – the other part of ECEE – is often described as education that promotes the holistic development of young children. Here, the focus is on the child and what the child needs now and in the future to achieve his or her potential. ECE is also about the development of identity. This includes individual identity, social identity, and cultural identity. Recently, we're recognizing the importance of promoting a positive ecological identity during the early years, as well.

It's not hard to see why EE and ECE needed to come together to meet the goals or purpose of each. We know that attitudes, habits, and dispositions formed during the early childhood years lay the foundation for the attitudes, habits, and dispositions we carry with us throughout life. The early childhood years, then, offer tremendous opportunities to foster the child's understanding and appreciation of the natural environment as the basis of a lifetime commitment to caring for the Earth. Tapping into the potential of these early years is perhaps our best chance of developing an environmentally -concerned citizenry that will have the knowledge and will to relate to the Earth in a sustainable way. For EE to be maximally effective, it needs to include the early childhood years and do so in developmentally appropriate ways.

But ECE also benefits from strong connections with EE. It's becoming increasingly clear that positive interactions with nature are essential to a young child's holistic development. Without close connections with nature, a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological, and spiritual development is at risk of being compromised. Resources of the EE community can be tremendously helpful to early childhood professionals in connecting young children with nature. Consider, for example, the contributions of such EE initiatives as nature play, natural playspaces, and nature preschools on early childhood education and the lives of many young children.

So now when asked what ECEE is all about, we can respond without hesitation that it's about working for an environmentally sustainable future and the wellbeing of young children. But is this the essence, the telos – or might there be more? Perhaps there is and perhaps it has to do with the making of beautiful people.

The idea of beautiful people emerged out of a professional forum focusing on the integration of peace, nature, and spirituality as a way to enhance or transform early childhood education. This forum – supported by the Biosophical Institute and hosted by the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee – consisted primarily of professionals from both the early childhood and environmental education fields. We asked ourselves what we wanted as desired outcomes of our educational programs for young children. As a part of this discussion, we considered how we would like a child to finish the statement, "I am a person who . . ."

By the end of the day, we had a list of dispositions, attitudes, and inclinations we would like to see fostered in our programs. This list included empathy, respect, attention, quiet reflecting, appreciation of diversity, and the ability to adapt to different situations. These desired outcomes, we felt, would result in the making of beautiful people – that is people who live with a sense of wonder, sensitivity to beauty, respect and compassion for others, a deep appreciation of the natural world, and an interest in creating a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

Can the idea of making beautiful people help define the telos of ECEE? Doing so would expand the idea of what we do as being "good for children and good for the Earth" to include "good for society." And if we decide that our goal is the making of beautiful people, how do we go about doing this?

Should our emphasis be on empathy, compassion, wonder, or something else? What should we look to as the hub or heart of what we do? The Chicago Zoological Society is committed to fostering a "culture of empathy" and considers this as being critical to their conservation mission. Their goal is to be a vehicle for positive social change in a way that includes but extends beyond the realm of conservation. What about ECEE? Where should we set our sights? What do we want our telos to be?

As we stand and view the world around us, we sometimes ask "What's it all about? What keeps it going? Are there dimensions below the surface that we're only beginning to understand? Today, as we stand and view the emerging field of ECEE, we might use these same questions to set a course for the future. We might also consider how we would like to complete the sentence, "We're a network of people who . . ."

Giving serious consideration to these questions may help us define a telos for ECEE that is greater than the sum of its parts. Perhaps we'll discover alchemy at work moving us toward the shaping of a more beautiful future. We gave birth to ECEE; we can now nurture and support its growth to help it become all that it can be.

Ruth Wilson is Professor Emeritus at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and currently resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She may be contacted at wilson.rutha@gmail.com.