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RECONSTRUCTING SUSTAINABILITY AND INCLUSION IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Network of Education Policy Centers

*"**Ecological justice** presents an understanding of nature's value and the imperative to preserve and equitably share its benefits across all strata of society."*

The intricate relationship between biodiversity, nature, and ecological justice presents a vital opportunity for educators to foster an understanding of environmental stewardship among themselves and their students. Biodiversity supports the complex ecosystems upon which all life depends, making it a critical component of our planet's health and resilience.

However, everything starts with ourselves. We must reconnect with nature as individuals before we can discuss how to build school systems that adhere to the values of ecological justice. Immersive experiences of nature, such as sensory walks and park or forest bathing, transcend mere recreational activities. They are profound approaches that underscore the intrinsic connection between humans and the natural environment, facilitate a multifaceted sensory engagement with nature, and deepen participants' appreciation and understanding of the ecological systems that sustain life.

We can cultivate a sophisticated environmental consciousness by deliberately incorporating these kinds of activities in both our everyday lives and the educational setting. This consciousness is essential for fostering ecological stewardship and advocacy for ecological justice.

Such initiatives make palpable the stark disparities in access to natural environments, often along socio-economic and racial lines, highlighting the urgent need for equitable access to green spaces as a matter of justice and ethical imperative. Ecological justice is grounded in an experiential understanding of nature's value and the imperative to preserve and equitably share its benefits across all strata of society. To gain an understanding of the philosophy of ecological justice, we describe key concepts illustrating its fundamentals through various perspectives.

How to practice sensory nature walks or "forest bathing":

next time you find yourself out in nature, focus your attention on your senses,

- what do you see, hear, smell or taste?
- explore your surroundings with touch, what does it feel like?
- direct your attention to one thing (a tree, flower, bird or insect) and note your experience

Each segment is followed by a set of questions designed to test comprehension and challenge the current view on environmental education.

These questions are not only asked to inspire reflection, but also to elicit action. They serve as prompts for educators to consider how these intricate and interrelated concepts can be integrated into their teaching practices, empowering them to foster a more inclusive, sustainable, and justice-oriented educational environment.

*"**Multispecies justice** challenges traditional views of justice by expanding its scope beyond human concerns to include the myriad forms of life with which we share our planet."*

MULTISPECIES JUSTICE

Multispecies justice is a concept pioneered by Donna Haraway in her 2008 book "When Species Meet". Multispecies justice challenges traditional views of justice by expanding its scope beyond human concerns to include the myriad forms of life with which we share our planet.

This approach recognizes that human existence is inextricably linked with that of animals, plants, forests, rivers, soil, air, and entire ecological systems. By acknowledging these connections, multispecies justice seeks to address the complex web of relationships and dependencies that sustain life on Earth. This framework forces us to consider the ethical implications of our interactions with non-human entities and the impact of our actions on their lives and habitats.

It raises critical questions about the roles and rights of all living beings within our shared environments, pushing for a more inclusive understanding of justice that respects and protects the integrity of diverse biological and ecological communities.

The discourse on multispecies justice also engages with emergent intersectional concerns, particularly how different axes of inequality affect both humans and non-humans. It scrutinizes the monopoly over justice historically claimed by dominant human groups, often at the expense of more vulnerable populations and the non-human world.

By critically examining who the subjects of justice are in our shared worlds, this perspective highlights the stakes involved when entire systems of life are subject to human-centered legal and social frameworks. It challenges these frameworks to evolve, advocating for a shift from anthropocentric paradigms to more holistic approaches that recognize the interconnectedness of all species.

This shift not only contests the traditional boundaries of justice but also opens up new pathways for advocating for the rights and well-being of all beings, not just humans, thereby fostering a more equitable and sustainable future for our planet.

- How can immersive experiences like nature walks and forest bathing be incorporated into the school routine to deepen students' appreciation of ecological systems?

- How can the concept of multispecies justice be integrated into the existing curriculum to help students understand the interconnectedness of all life forms on Earth?

- How might expanding the scope of justice to include non-human entities change students' perspectives on environmental and social issues?

- What are some practical classroom activities that could help students appreciate the complex web of relationships and dependencies that sustain life on Earth?

*"**Kinship** extends beyond traditional familial ties, encompassing a broader spectrum that includes interspecies relationships and human and non-human life are equally valued."*

REGENERATING KINSHIP

"Regenerating Kinship with Planet Earth" is a compelling call to reevaluate and renew our relationship with our environment. Described in a book of the same name by Michael Cohen, this concept emphasizes a deep-seated reconnection with nature, advocating for a holistic approach that views human well-being as intricately linked to the health of the planet. It invites us to adopt sustainable practices and attitudes that nurture Earth's ecosystems, promoting a balanced coexistence.

The idea is not just to protect the environment, but to actively restore and rejuvenate it, acknowledging the Earth as a living entity with which we share a vital, familial bond. This rekindled kinship with the planet is essential for future generations' well-being and our natural world's overall vitality. The concept of "kinship" extends beyond traditional familial ties, encompassing a broader spectrum that includes interspecies relationships.

Such a relationship, particularly when conceptualized as policy, emphasizes recognizing and valuing differences rather than similarities, fostering connections based on potential or actual affinities that support the sustenance of life. This type of kinship, often referred to as "oddkin", is formed in response to the adverse impacts some humans have on the environment.

It involves building alliances that are not predicated on lineage but are actively created, constructed, and enacted through collaborative efforts. This innovative kinship framework challenges conventional norms and identity categories, advocating instead for unity against divisive dualities. It is a journey, not defined by the starting point but by the destination - a collective movement towards ecological and social sustainability.

By redefining kinship in this way, it becomes a powerful tool for ecological advocacy, pushing for a future where human and non-human life are equally valued and where biodiversity thrives free from the destructive tendencies of anthropocentric (human-centered) activities. This approach does not just exist; it must be constantly performed and reinvented, making it a dynamic and influential force in shaping our interactions with the world around us.

- How can "regenerating kinship with Planet Earth" influence the way environmental education is approached in schools?

- What strategies can educators use to foster a sense of kinship and responsibility towards the environment among students?

- How can the concept of "oddkin" be introduced to students to promote inclusivity and unity against divisive norms?

*"**A world of many worlds** recognizes our world's inherent complexity, holism, circularity, and diversity."*

A WORLD OF MANY WORLDS

The notion of "a world of many worlds" critiques the overly simplistic, reductionist frameworks that dominate contemporary global systems, particularly in education. This concept challenges the imposition of uniform, linear models that fail to recognize our world's inherent complexity, holism, circularity, and diversity.

Education systems, in particular, often try to define standardized categories - a specific type of student, teacher, or curriculum - that do not account for individuals' varied and unique experiences. In a world as diverse as ours, there is no "universal child", yet the education systems exert considerable power to forge such a definition. This leads to the creation of a typical, average child typology, upon which entire national education policies are often based. Unfortunately, this approach invariably sidelines a significant number of children who do not fit this mold, categorizing them as needing "inclusion" or labeling them as "disadvantaged". Such labels not only marginalize but also fail to appreciate each child's distinct contributions and needs, ultimately undermining the potential for genuinely holistic and inclusive education that reflects the rich tapestry of human experiences.

The educational approach often mirrors society's tendency to compartmentalize and segment complex systems, which can lead to a fragmented understanding of life itself. In schools, children are routinely categorized by age and taught in separate groups, which can hinder the diverse interactions that occur in real-world environments.

This method extends to the structuring of curriculum, where subjects are distinctly isolated. Students might spend an hour on mathematics before abruptly shifting to a language arts class, then to science, without integrating these disciplines into a cohesive learning experience. This separation fails to reflect the interconnectedness of knowledge and the multifaceted nature of learning.

"Polyphony, characterized by multiple independent melodies harmonized into a single piece, mirrors life's complexity and layered nature."

By compartmentalizing education into discrete blocks, we may inadvertently limit students' ability to see the broader connections between subjects and real-life applications. This educational model does not align well with the concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of social categorizations and their ability to create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Just as life cannot be neatly divided into isolated segments, learning benefits from a more integrated, holistic approach where different streams of knowledge flow together, enhancing comprehension and relevance in the complex tapestry of daily life.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing's reflection on learning polyphony beautifully illustrates how this musical form can transform our approach to listening and understanding. Polyphony, characterized by multiple independent melodies harmonized into a single piece, mirrors life's complexity and layered nature.

As Tsing points out, discerning these separate yet interwoven melodies teaches us to appreciate the nuances of harmony and dissonance. This heightened awareness is crucial for recognizing the diverse temporal rhythms and trajectories within any assemblage - be it ecological, social, or cultural. In essence, polyphony encourages a form of listening that is attentive to multiplicity and the interaction of differing elements.

By learning to identify and value these intricate relationships, we gain insights into the broader, interconnected systems that shape our world. Tsing's analogy serves as a metaphor for engaging with the world's complex systems, urging us to perceive and cherish the varied and dynamic patterns that constitute our surroundings.

- How can intersectionality be applied to education to ensure that all students' unique contributions and needs are valued?

- How can the analogy of learning polyphony be used to teach students about the complexity and interconnectedness of real-world systems?

*"**Degrowth** challenges the fundamental assumption that economic growth is inherently beneficial."*

DEGROWTH

The "degrowth" movement is gaining traction as a radical alternative to the prevailing growth-based economic models, often criticized for their sustainability shortcomings. Degrowth challenges the fundamental assumption that economic growth is inherently beneficial. Instead, it advocates for a planned reduction of production and consumption that aligns with the Earth's ecological limits and promotes a fair distribution of resources.

This approach is linked to rejecting "weak" sustainability models that fail to address the root causes of environmental degradation, including the economic growth paradigm, neoliberal capitalism, and the colonized social imaginary.

Instead, degrowth emphasizes a transformation in knowledge elements, competency components, and pedagogical approaches towards stronger, more resilient systems that respect human and ecological boundaries.

Education plays a crucial role in this shift. By fostering an understanding of the causes of unsustainability and the barriers to achieving sustainable systems, education can equip individuals with the tools to critically evaluate current practices and advocate for substantive change.

Strategies towards sustainability in a degrowth context may involve rethinking consumption patterns, redesigning economic structures to prioritize well-being, and actively resisting the perpetuation of colonial mindsets that undervalue the environment and certain communities.

Through these means, the principles of degrowth aim not only to mitigate environmental impact but also to engender a more equitable and thoughtful global society.

- How can the principles of degrowth be incorporated into the curriculum to foster a more sustainable and equitable mindset in students?

- What classroom activities can be designed to encourage students to rethink consumption patterns and advocate for sustainable economic structures?

*"**Centrismlessness** advocates that neither humans nor nature are the dominant focus, but rather, attention is given to their mutual interactions and the impacts they have on each other."*

CENTRISMLESSNESS

The concept of "centrismlessness" in environmental discourse addresses the limitations of both anthropocentric (human-centric) and ecocentric (nature-centric) views, which often place humans and nature in opposition, creating a dichotomy that can hinder comprehensive solutions to environmental issues.

Anthropocentrism prioritizes human needs and interests, often at the expense of ecological health, while ecocentrism places ecosystems at the forefront, sometimes overlooking the needs and rights of human communities.

Centrismlessness suggests a paradigm shift towards a more integrated approach that recognizes and values the intricate, interdependent relationships between humans and the natural world.

This perspective advocates for a balance where neither humans nor nature are seen as the central or dominant focus, but rather, attention is given to their mutual interactions and the impacts they have on each other. By moving beyond a dualistic view, we can explore the potential for justice and sustainability in the interactions between humans and nature.

This involves acknowledging that human actions impact ecological systems and vice versa, thus requiring solutions that do not exclusively benefit one at the cost of the other.

A centrismlessness approach encourages us to consider how policies, behaviors, and technologies can foster an equitable coexistence that supports the health and well-being of all entities within the biosphere.

Such a shift could lead to more adaptive, resilient, and sustainable environmental management practices that are equitable for both human populations and the ecosystems on which they depend.

- How can educators teach students about the limitations of anthropocentric and ecocentric views in addressing environmental issues?

- What are some ways to promote a more integrated approach that recognizes the interdependent relationships between humans and the natural world?

- How can the concept of centrismlessness be applied in classroom discussions to explore equitable solutions for both human populations and ecosystems?

- What practical examples can be used to demonstrate the mutual interactions and impacts between humans and nature?

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She is a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Education and Communication Commission, co-author of the Council of Europe Sustainability for Youth and Mediterranean-Mosaic books, founder partner of the House of Nature Play House and member of the International Degrowth Network and the Common Ecologies platform. She works for the Education Reform Initiative in Turkey as the Educational Observatory.

Co-funded by
the European Union