

Sowing the seeds of mindfulness

Emily Vera & Kate Dawson



It was a warm, spring day with a glimpse of sunshine streaming through the trees when we stopped along the pathway to look at the dandelions.

Ludwig, one of our preschoolers: *"I want to pick one. They are beautiful."*

Brianna, turning to face Ludwig: *"But only one, 'cause we want to leave one for the bees."*

Ludwig: *"Brianna, you too, only one."*

Brianna, blowing on the dandelion head: *"I am planting more dandelions with the seeds. There are a hundred bees and only a few flowers. We need to take the tops off, take the seeds out and that grows more."*



Brianna, blowing dandelion seeds. Image: Emily Vera

The simple act of picking a single flower has sparked many conversations, theories and opinions amongst our students and our staff team. The picking itself is not particularly consequential, but it has forced us to reflect more deeply on our values and beliefs about children, childhood, and our role as educators.

Terra Nova Nature School is situated in a 63 acre parkland located in Richmond, British Columbia. A rural gem in an urban setting, it offers varied sites for play and exploration, including expansive grassy fields; wooded groves; a Healing Garden of herbs and pebbles; community gardens and farm fields; and numerous pathways and bridges. Everywhere there are trees, plants and creatures for the children to investigate and enjoy. As individuals and as an organization, we espouse values of environmental sustainability and stewardship. As educators, though, we wonder how much the children should share in the responsibilities of caring for this land and its inhabitants. What does that look like in our teaching practices? How do we reconcile such weighty concerns with children's day-to-day play and explorations within the park?

The answers are neither obvious nor easy. Inspired by the practices of schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, we see children as strong, capable, and inherently intelligent citizens of our community (Malaguzzi, p.52). We cannot, therefore, excuse the children, any more than we can absolve ourselves, from acting as mindful stewards of the land.

What does it mean to be a steward of the land? For us, it means considering the needs and desires of not only ourselves, but of the more-than-human (Abram, 1996). As educators, we decide which areas of the park to avoid – tender new seedlings under an oak, or a field where kildeer (for UK readers, this is a type of bird) are nesting – and we share the thinking behind these decisions with the children: *"If we stomp all the grasses down by marching through that field, the vole cannot hide from the swooping barred owl, so we'll stay on this path the coyote made", or "I don't know how much birch bark can be stripped from the tree without harming it, let's do some research before we take it."*

We also want to encourage the children to think critically, asking them: *"What else relies on this dandelion to live? If we pick all the dandelions, what might happen to the native bees that are sourcing nectar after such a late, wet spring?"* Inviting questions develops a curiosity of the world around and supports a framework of eco-pedagogy (Freire, 1967).

As well as the dandelions, there are many other edible wilds on the land: salal; salmon, thimble, and blackberries; chickweed and land cress; spruce tips; rose hips; and stinging nettle, to name just a few. There are also tangible reminders of previous settlers: Europeans who planted lilac, apple, cherry and plum trees; and the Japanese families who planted goji bushes and patches of huki that, decades later, continue to flourish. It is wonderful to make use of these abundant 'wild' foods in a soup, stir-fry or tea, or as an inspirational still-life in the art studio. Always, though, we pick mindfully, taking 'just some', while leaving enough for others to survive and thrive. (We know that Coyote loves apples in the fall, we can tell from her scat!)

Recipe for Dandelion Tea

Harvest some lush dandelions, play with the stems in the mud kitchen, and use the leaves in a salad, keeping just the flower heads for the tea. Wash the flowerheads very well and then steep in boiling water. Remove and compost the flowerheads. Add honey to taste. Chill in the fridge for 3-4 hours and serve over ice cubes.



Frazier, creating dandelion artwork in the studio. Image, Emily Vera

Admonishing the children not to pick, or creating rules about 'how often' or 'how many' dandelions/apples/acorns to pick is an oversimplification that serves no one. Indeed, it seems only to encourage sneakiness amongst the children, and crankiness amongst the adults! We want the children to have the freedoms of childhood: to fall in love with the natural landscape as they explore sensorially, playfully, and with unencumbered joy. Seed heads, petals, and leaves are the loose parts of rich dramatic play and creativity, so the making of dandelion crowns, daisy bracelets and long grass swords is always encouraged!

If, however, a child yanks on a plant, pulling it out roots and all, we feel frustrated that their actions are needlessly violent. When a flower is picked, but discarded on the pathway just seconds later, we feel dismay at how quickly the child's interest, and the flower, are abandoned, and at the apparent apathy for a life so quickly ended. We wonder if such acts, allowed to pass without notice or consequence, might contribute in adulthood to a worldview of oneself as a consumer, living all too comfortably in a disposable world?


While the lens of developmentalism offers some insight into children's impulsivity and egocentric perspective, we think there is a bolder place in our role as educators for the teaching of reverence.

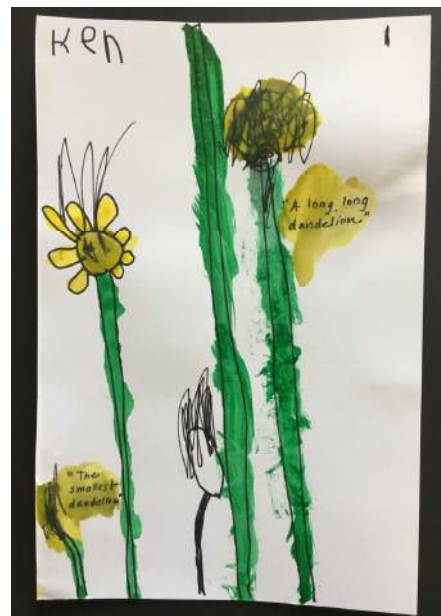
Teaching reverence is in keeping not only with our strong Image of the Child, but with our understanding of Indigenous Ways of Knowing (or Indigenous Knowledge frameworks), that are integral to our place-conscious practice (Greenwood, p.93). An Indigenous worldview sees all creatures living equally as part of a whole, with humans no more important than any other being. All creatures are revered for their gifts. Acting with humility, and offering our thanks, are ways that we can show respect for the more-than-human. In our school life together, we sing a short song before enjoying any harvested foods:

"Oh, the Earth is good to me, and so I thank the Earth, for giving me, the things I need, the Sun and the Rain and the Apple Seed, the Earth is good to me."
(Based on the work of Paul Smith & Walter Kent, 1948)



Ludwig, harvesting. Image, Emily Vera

Enjoy your landscape, but tread lightly and pick mindfully – even the weeds! Take time to address moments of apparent indifference, by teaching children to harvest in a respectful way that considers the needs of the more-than-human. Together, revere the dandelion, offer thanks for its gifts and its place in this bountiful world. 



References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Language and perception in a more than human world.* Pantheon, New York.
- Freire, P., & Freire, A. M. A. (1998). *Pedagogy of the heart.* Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Greenwood, D. (2013). A critical theory of place-conscious education. *International handbook of research on environmental education*, 93-100.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1994). *Your image of the child: Where teaching begins.* Child Care Information Exchange, 52-52.
- Smith, P. & Kent, W (1948). *The Legend of Johnny Appleseed, Walt Disney Pictures.*

Kate Dawson and **Emily Vera** are the Coordinators at Terra Nova Nature School operated by Thompson Community Association in Richmond, BC, Canada. Their passion for outdoor learning, place-based education and responsive curriculum weaves throughout their work with children and families in the community.