

Children's Storytelling Within Common World Pedagogies: A Literature Review

Queenie Yu

Affiliation: Capilano University

E-mail: queenieyu@my.capilanou.ca

Abstract

This literature review aims to look at how children's storytelling practices are understood within common world pedagogies. This paper highlights how common world pedagogies that integrate and support children's storytelling practices in ways that reflect their lived experiences with the natural world, nurture their ecological identity, and encourage children into a deeper knowing of the natural world. Pedagogical documentation is also emphasized as a tool to help educators implement storytelling within common world pedagogies. It is crucial that our writing and documentation honour and exemplify the theoretical perspective that underlies common world pedagogies. The intention of this literature review is to plant a seed that encourages further dialogue and discussions that consider how children's everyday practices and experiences in the natural world may be implicated and supported by common world pedagogies.

Keywords: *young children; early childhood education; outdoor education; pedagogy; common world pedagogy; children's storytelling*

Introduction

Outdoor education is currently a contested subject within early childhood education due to the perspectives and attitudes that it garners (Taylor, 2011). While it is generally recognized that outdoor experiences are beneficial to children's overall health and wellbeing (see *BC Early Learning Framework* from Government of British Columbia, 2008), the attitudes surrounding children's outdoor education and experiences have come to mainly focus on two areas: children's ecological stewardship or ecological identity. A prevalent topic discussed in tandem with children's outdoor experiences is the geological epoch known as the Anthropocene, which asserts that humans and human activity are the main cause of environmental damage and possibly irreversible change to the planet (The Anthropocene Project, 2018). The naming of this geological epoch has sparked interdisciplinary debates and questioning of "what it means to be human, what we mean by the natural environment, and about our place and agency in the world" (Taylor, 2017, p. 1449). As a result, some early childhood education scholars have experienced a paradigm shift in regards to their approach to outdoor education. While some believe that the Anthropocene signals a need to cultivate children into environmental stewards, many early childhood education scholars challenge the authenticity of children's relationships with nature within those expectations and denounce the human-centric values of the Anthropocene (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Taylor, 2017). Instead, early years' influencers advocate for the notion of common worlds, which decenters humans to welcome the perspective that all living and non-living species exist within a network of relationships and assemblages (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Malone, 2016; Argent, Vintimilla, Lee, & Wapenaar, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

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experiences in the natural world may be implicated and supported by common worlds pedagogies.

Setting the Stage: Common World Pedagogies

While it is undeniable that humans have caused severe and irreversible damage to the natural world, there is considerable objection to the continued centering and false supremacy of humans when considering environmental issues. Post-feminist scholars argue that the naming of the Anthropocene perpetuates the values of human-centrism, whereby emphasis is not only placed on humans for the negative impact of our actions on nature, but also considers humans as the saviours who will rectify the degradation of the natural world (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Taylor, 2017). This paradox elevates the role of man and effectively places power and significance on humans alone, silencing more-than-human entities and ignoring the agency of the natural world. Additionally, this approach to the Anthropocene widens the chasm that separates humans and nature, perpetuating the misconception that “humans are not nature and it is possible for some species, namely humans, to be more or less nature, connected or disconnected from nature, and superior to or dominant over nature” (Malone, 2016, p. 43). Argent et al. (2017) assert that only by decentering the human can there be the space to include and consider the entangled forces of nature and human culture. This process requires disassembling traditional assumptions and perceptions which separate humans and the natural world, as “thinking that is firmly rooted in binaries, such as the nature-culture divide, creates constraints in both action and discourse” (Argent, et al 2017, p. 18). Thus, nature must be considered as “a collective – a network, an assemblage or an imbroglio – of all living and inert things, including human and non-human animals, objects and discursive practices” (Taylor, 2011, p. 426). In her later work, Taylor (2017) maintains this notion, adding that an approach to the Anthropocene which acknowledges the entanglements of nature and culture not only eradicates the fallacy of human supremacy, it reaffirms the inseparable enmeshment of human and more-than-human worlds and “signals that it is no longer plausible to perpetuate the nature-culture divide that structures western knowledge systems and underpins humanism” (p. 1450). This call to challenge human supremacy and human-centric views and move instead towards honouring more-than-human entities, lies at the heart of the common world pedagogies.

Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015), assert that common world pedagogies consider the collective modes through which children learn from their engagements with

the human and more-than-human beings and entities who exists within their common worlds. The very foundation of this framework acknowledges that we do not exist alone,

but rather are situated within assemblages, in inextricable relationships and entanglements with human and more-than-human entities (Argent et al., 2017; Taylor, 2017). This is an important shift in perspective as it not only decenters the human but also subsequently elevates more-than-human entities to equal status and significance. This paradigm shift disrupts traditional discourses of knowledge and learning as being a process occurring within the individual human or between humans. Rather than privileging scientific knowledge about the natural world, common world pedagogies considers learning as emerging “from the relations taking place between all the actors – human and more-than-human alike” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 508). This actively challenges what we think we know about the natural world and its inhabitants. Adopting this view of learning requires us to be attuned to the plentiful ways that humans and more-than-humans interact and affect each other within their encounters (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

Donna Haraway (as cited in Taylor, 2017) asserts that “we are constantly transforming and being transformed through our real-life, flesh and blood relations with other living beings (not all of them human) ... whereby the world itself is transformed” (p. 1454). Haraway’s claims not only accentuate our entanglements with more-than-humans, but also implore us to consider the mutual agency between humans and more-than-humans. As we learn to recognize ourselves as situated within common worlds, we may begin to understand “what it might mean to learn collectively with the more-than-human world rather than about it, acknowledging more-than-human agency and paying attention to the mutual effects of human-nonhuman relations” (Taylor, 2017, p. 1455).

Learning to think with more-than-human entities “not only challenges human-centric assumptions about individual children’s significant relations, it also challenges the assumption of human exceptionalism, including the assumption that only humans have the capacity to exercise agency” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 508).

Common world pedagogies disrupt the regimes of truth surrounding environmental understanding and bring into question, not only what it means to be human, but also the notion of agency (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). Contrary to traditional perception, agency does not exist in humans alone. Adopting a common world perspective awakens us to see that we exist as just one of many agentic entities and to understand the implications of our situatedness (Taylor, 2017).

Children's Storytelling and Narratives

Storytelling and the creation of narratives are common practices within early childhood, whether they are initiated by adults or children. Culturally speaking, storytelling provides children a “socially constructed opportunity” to communicate their lived experiences through a blending of imagination and every day occurrences (Binder, 2014). As such, storytelling offers adults an opening into children’s meaning making and gives insight into their lived experiences. Describing how storytelling has influenced her early learning classroom, Binder (2014) states that children’s story play has not only provided opportunities for genuine and relational understanding of children’s meaning making of their world, it has also influenced her own work and research as an educator and how she views children’s narratives. Similar to the work of common world pedagogies, pedagogies that honour children’s storytelling and actively listen to the ideas within their stories also reconceptualise discourses surrounding learning and knowledge.

Neoliberalism, as Bai and Cohen (2014) describe, has “objectified thinking” (p. 606), whereby knowledge consumption is privileged over subjective thought. This is also reflected in education, where educators are regarded as the keepers of knowledge and must therefore transfer that knowledge to children to prepare them for their future role as productive citizens. Within this narrative, children are positioned as inferior, their knowledge resources are seen as lacking or in need of intervention. A pedagogy that values children’s storytelling and listens to their ideas, can transform the classroom into a space where educators and children are co-constructors of knowledge (Binder, 2014). When children are seen as co-constructors of knowledge, children are actively invited to offer their own ideas and creativity. They have the space to share their thoughts and test out their theories and curiosities. Binder (2014) describes storytelling as an empowerment of children’s voices that reveals their “personal signature” which can “disrupt the ‘teacher as knower construct’” (p. 12). This perspective listens to children’s ideas and takes their thoughts into account through the forming of emergent curriculum. Storytelling offers opportunities to “(re)create learning in the classroom through curiosity and wonder” and reminds us of the possibilities that these new stories and experiences can bring to children’s every day worlds (Binder, 2014, p. 19).

Bai and Cohen (2014) characterize storytelling as an act of “entering and participating in an imaginative story-world” (p. 603), where the participant releases or holds loosely their existing knowledge to be receptive of the new and unfamiliar. This provides a rich understanding of not only what storytelling is for children, but what it can mean for early learning. The act of participating in a story is livelier through children’s

dramatic storytelling, in which full-bodied engagement and encounters are at play. As children take on the role of a character or creature within the story, their embodiment of the character allows them to attend to the unique qualities and characteristics of the role and in their full-bodied engagement consider how to portray the character to make it come alive (Berkowitz, 2011). This immersive experience encourages children to think deeply with the character and requires them to not only consider the character's movements, but also their possible perspectives and experiences within the story. Bai and Cohen (2014) illustrate that within this embodied knowing "there is a temporary suspension of the constructed identity of the self" (pp. 603-604), where for a moment, we embrace another's point of view and experience.

There exists a lack of scholarly material that considers the possibilities of children's storytelling within the framework of common world pedagogies. Though, individually, each have been extensively considered in scholarly writing and conversations, it appears that presently there is an absence of writing that bridges the notions of both and considers how common world pedagogies can be used to support children's storytelling. Having outlined the values and possibilities of both practices, however, it is evident that there are ample opportunities to enhance children's experiences with other humans and the more-than-human when we consider how their storytelling may be shaped and supported through a pedagogy that appreciates and acknowledges common worlds. The final section of this literature review will bridge the ideas and values of common world pedagogies with children's storytelling to uncover how this enhanced practice may: (1) reveal and give insight into children's lived experiences with the more-than-human (2) support and nurture children's ecological identity, and (3) encourage in children a deeper relationship with the natural world.

Bridging Storytelling and Common Worlds

Pelo (2014) postulates that stories about the more-than-human world have the ability to intertwine "imagination, emotion, experience, knowledge and ethics", engage us as participants to expand how we come to know place and its inhabitants, and "locate us within the ecology of a place" (p. 8). Storytelling in this sense is more than curating narratives or interpretations, but rather a tool to widen our experiences of the natural world. Considering the notion that children's storytelling reveals their lived experiences, an approach to pedagogy through common worlds perspectives appreciates children's

stories as revealing the “inter- and intra- action with the very materials [in nature] that matter to them” (Taylor, 2017, p. 1456). In other words, children’s storytelling in and with nature not only highlights their outdoor experiences, but also reveals their understandings of these engagements with more-than-human entities. Coskie, Trudel, and Vohs (2010) extend upon this approach to storytelling in connection to literacy, indicating that this provides an opportunity for children to bridge their social and cultural identities with their academic identity. From an outdoor education perspective, then, it is important to also consider how children’s storytelling strengthens their ecological identity.

Returning to Pelo’s (2014) work, she speculates that our alienation from and lack of intimacy with the natural world is one of the greatest causes of our current ecological crisis. She contends that children’s personal, firsthand experiences with more-than-human entities can never be replaced with textbook knowledge as other living things have the ability to affect us in ways that are lost through indirect contact (Pelo, 2014). Yet despite this reality, traditional education continues to deter children from experiencing the natural world firsthand, all the while, still expecting them to be future stewards of the environment. It is for this reason that Taylor (2017) argues against the human-centric assumptions of environmental stewardship which puts its hope on children to be the future saviours of the natural world. She suggests that “although well meaning, [stewardship pedagogies] do not lead us towards radically rethinking ourselves, our place and our agency in the world” (Taylor, 2017, p. 1453). Instead of putting our efforts into transmitting environmental facts and knowledge to children, we must first nurture their ecological identity and relationship with the more-than-human world through pedagogical efforts that value common worlds. This is where children’s storytelling with the more-than-human becomes an effective tool to nurture children’s ecological identity. As Coskie et al. (2010) describe, if we learn to tell and re-tell stories often, eventually the story becomes a part of our identity and the telling of that story becomes naturalized. In the same way, if we encourage children’s storytelling about their experiences with the more-than-human, the stories that children tell of their relationships with more-than-human entities become part of their identity.

Both common world pedagogies and children’s storytelling reconceptualise learning and challenge hegemonic discourses of knowledge. Storytelling within the framework of common world pedagogies offers children possibilities to not only learn from and with (rather than about) more-than-human entities, but also challenges us into a deeper knowing of nature as “more than just part of the backdrop” (Blaise, Hamm, & Iorio, 2017, p. 39). Our pedagogies must allow children to be aware that they exist amongst assemblages and complex systems that connect them to humans and more-than-humans (Malone, 2016). Thus, returning to Pelo’s (2014) notion of children’s

irreplaceable firsthand experiences, children's common world storytelling must stem from authentic encounters and "the physicality of [their] relationships" (Malone, 2016, p. 46) with more-than-human entities, not just from textbook facts. Allowing children more opportunities for authentic and genuine encounters with the natural world will not only support their learning but also strengthen their relationships with more-than-human entities. After all, as Elaine Brooks (as cited in Pelo, 2014) suggests, "people are unlikely to value what they cannot name" (p. 7). Therefore, we must allow children the opportunity to get to know and give name to – not scientific names, but personal names and references – the more-than-human entities that they encounter in order to learn to value them.

It is important to note, however, that storytelling with nature does not simply mean anthropomorphizing more-than-human entities in our narratives. Although, as Waters (2011) has found, research suggests that "careful, sensitive and measured use of anthropomorphic tools can support the learning of scientific ideas, as well as forge a value base centered in moral and emotional connections to nature" (p. 250), the intent of storytelling within common world pedagogies is to respect the agency of more-than-human entities. Thus, storytelling through common world perspectives honours more-than-human entities as "more than simply *objects* being directed by humans, but as *subjects* in [their] own right... shaping an exchange and co-merging with children" (Malone, 2016, p. 48). With that said, appreciating the agency of more-than-humans appears to only be a challenge for us as adults. Children seem to inherently have this ability to embrace being in relationship with the natural world, inviting us to be attuned to the vibrancy and agency of more-than-human entities and "confronting us with the problem of how to cross the divide, how to become more intimate, how to communicate" (Argent et al., 2017, p. 12).

Pedagogical Documentation

Having outlined the importance of supporting children's storytelling within the framework of common world pedagogies, the question now is: How are we to implement this in our practice? Besides offering children more opportunities to be with and learn from nature, it is also important to approach these experiences with care and intention. Pedagogical documentation can be an effective tool to support children's storytelling in common worlds pedagogies as it gives educators the space to think and ponder the

multiple meanings behind children's experiences (Blaise et al., 2017). Moreover, pedagogical documentation reminds us to be present with children, not just as observers but also as active participants. Within the process of documentation, the educator is not intended to be situated on the edge of children's experiences, but rather "she is always and already entangled with many layers of complexity" (Blaise et al., 2017, p. 37). In this way, educators can support children's storytelling endeavors by participating in these narratives and consider how our agency also implicates and affects the assemblages we and the children are a part of.

In line with the theme of children's storytelling, however, the stories that we as educators tell of children's lived experiences with the natural world are just as crucial in promoting common world perspectives. While pedagogical narration and documentation may not be new concepts to many early childhood educators, it can be easy to only give voice to the human participants in our writing and inadvertently silence the agency of the more-than-human participants (Iorio, Coustley, & Grayland, 2018). We must be aware and reflexive in our research and writing processes so we honour the agency of all participants, both human and more-than-human so as to not perpetuate human-centric and child-centric thinking. According to Iorio et al. (2018), our pedagogical documentation should make visible "the constant attempt to resituate the more-than-human as paramount" (p. 169). This requires that we highlight and make visible children's storytelling within the framework of common world pedagogies, and we also must speak of our work with children and more-than-human entities in a way that honours the agency of all participants, both human and more-than-human.

Conclusion

As Kimmerer (2013) points out, children naturally have the ability to extend to plants and animals "self and intention and compassion – until we teach them not to" (p. 57). For this reason, we must learn to adopt a common world perspective in our pedagogies so that children know they exist within a conglomerate of intertwined relations with more-than-human entities. Even more, we need to encourage children's storytelling with nature to honour the agency of more-than-human beings. Returning to the words of Kimmerer (2013), "when we tell [children] that a tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us" (p. 57). Therefore, whether in children's storytelling or our own documentation of children's interactions with nature, we must promote the dignity of more-than-human entities and abolish the egocentric gap that separates humans and more-than-humans. Though presently there is a lack of scholarly research and writing

that bridges the notions of common worlds pedagogies and children's storytelling with nature, the intent of this literature review is to act as a catalyst for further conversations and dialogue that considers how children's storytelling may be supported through common worlds pedagogies.

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Author:

Queenie Yu is a fourth year student at Capilano University's School of Education and Childhood Studies.