

The cover art features a close-up of a woman's face on the right side. She has dark hair and is wearing a dark jacket. Her face is partially covered in bright red paint, which is applied in a circular pattern around her eye and cheek. The background behind her is a white wall with a faint, grey handprint. On the left side of the cover, there are several red circles of varying sizes scattered vertically.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

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UNESCO Observatory

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE

'Apitaw-Picikwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picikwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Being More, Needing Less: Fostering a Nature Connection Through Art

Hannah Dabrowski

ABSTRACT

Hannah Dabrowski's journey into education started as a counselor at summer camp. It was here she learned and understood the value of outdoor education, as well as experiential education. She continued in this field for a decade, continuously learning and growing in her approach. Although she appreciated the work, she discovered that she preferred nurturing long-term relationships with children in outdoor settings; instead, she found herself in settings where school field trips would come for a day and she would never see the students again. She realized there were two options: she could either lead similar activities with different groups of children every day or lead different activities with the same children every day. Her desire was for the latter option. In February of 2019, she began working with an organisation called the Pine Project, which offered the opportunity to create long-term relationships with children while in nature and also an entirely different philosophy of learning and education that she is still navigating. She is excited to continue to explore different methods of teaching and to dive deeper into the philosophies employed by the Pine Project.

The stories and events that take place in this article occurred prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thursdays are my favourite day of the week. They begin earlier than my other days, with my waking up and instantly checking the weather. Don't get me wrong, I check the weather on other days too, but on this day, it's critical. On Thursdays, I need to check the weather. I continue with my morning routine: getting dressed, packing a lunch, brushing my teeth and then heading to the office. But on Thursdays, I don't sit down at my computer to start my day. Instead, I grab the keys to our work vehicle and drive to a local park. That's because on Thursdays, I spend the whole day outside.

I am an outdoor educator with the Pine Project, an organization whose mission it is to connect people of all ages, but especially children, to nature. This means connecting to the land in deep and meaningful ways through a variety of arts-based activities, including songs, crafts and much more. Thursday mornings pass quickly with twelve children, ages 4-6, exploring and learning with me. The afternoons fly by while playing with 7- to 9-year-olds in the forest.

Thursdays are my favourite day.

The Pine Project's mission is to foster confidence, competence, resilience and connection to nature through transformative outdoor experiences for people of all ages in Toronto, Ontario and beyond. We deliver programs focused on building relationships with self, others and the environment. This empowers our mantra: "Be more, need less."

Additionally, at Pine, we are a strong proponent of the idea that teaching does not necessarily have to entertain the "traditional" teacher-student dynamic, but instead can reach back even further to traditions that use a basis of mutual respect framed as 'mentoring'. In this way, we see that we are not only guiding the participants in our programs and having them learn from us, but that we remain open to learning from them as well.

Since I began working at Pine, I have accumulated so many experiences and learned so many lessons that have shaped me as an educator. These range from understanding the importance of nurturing a connection to nature in children, to the potential of nature to be a source of inspiration for young artists, crafters and storytellers.

The Pine Project in Action

A well-designed nature education program has the potential to be egalitarian in a way that a school classroom cannot. In nature, no one person is more important than the other, and we can all learn from nature's stories and lessons. The process of fostering a deep connection to the land does not favour one particular national origin, culture or mother tongue.

For example, one Thursday afternoon, I was out with our 7- to 9-year-old group learning to identify trees. We had gathered various branches in order to make some "forest tea" (adding conifer needles to hot water). Part of our lesson involved using field guides to correctly identify the trees, as well as learning about harvesting ethics, such as only taking a small amount from various parts of the tree and giving thanks to the tree by offering bird seed in return. As we were waiting for the water to get hot, a discussion was started regarding how many languages participants could speak. One participant said she spoke two, another three and many others said one. Although this was a simple conversation, it was a good reminder of the diversity even within our small group. The participant who could speak two languages was not born in Canada, and English is not her first language. Participating in the Pine Project programs helped her excel in ways that may not have been available to her at school, whether it was through practicing to count in English when playing a game, or learning more about the Canadian wildlife and plants that are frequently invisible to many people born in Canada. Once, when we were taking a nature walk as a group, she said out of the blue: 'Nature just smells so good.' Another time, she told me that 'when [she's] feeling angry or sad, [she] likes to go out in nature and it makes [her] feel better.' These are, amazingly, the words of a 7-year-old.



Figure 1
Crafting the Pine Project
Hannah Dobrowski
2019

With nature as the setting, the Pine Project programs bring various arts-based components into our curriculum including singing and crafting to foster connection to nature.

One of the activities we offer involves the carving of native woods with actual carving tools.

You might be thinking, 'Isn't a 5-year-old a bit young to use a carving tool?' To that, we say, 'Not too young!'

We have specific guidelines around tool use, and participants know if they cannot follow the rules, they aren't ready to carve. Prior to carving, participants must recite the five carving rules to an instructor, proving they understand the rules. After this, they are free to begin carving. It is a powerful feeling to set up an experience with young children that could have serious repercussions. One minute the children are joking and laughing and playing a game; the next, they must sit down and have a five-minute discussion on safety. The children are immediately transformed, understanding the gravity of the situation. A serious side comes out even in the biggest class clown. Carving calls for respect and responsibility, or they will be unable to participate. And do they ever want to participate!

Through my experience guiding this activity, I have seen participants create incredibly inspiring projects, from the more basic spoon or bowl burned out with a coal, to intricate swords and spears.

Another activity, and one of my favourites, involves the trading of precious crafted possessions. It is an opportunity for participants and staff to display what they have created or found, and to trade them with each other. Examples of such items include porcupine quills, jewellery the participants have made from plants, spoons they have carved, animal bones, bowls they have burned out with coals, drawings they have made and much more. Each item that is traded has its own story, and each participant holds these individual stories. When trading begins, a web of stories is created with anecdotes being shared about each object. The unique story of each object is also passed down the line, forging future connections. Unsurprisingly, the connections made through these trades continue on, whether between the participants themselves or between the participants and nature.

I feel incredibly privileged to be able to spend my Thursdays outside with groups of awe-inspiring children, using art to connect them with nature, and nature to connect them with art.

I will leave you with the lyrics of a song often sung at the Pine Project. The origins of this song are uncertain, but can be partially traced back to a conference called the Art of Mentoring on Saltspring Island. Songs are an important part of our curriculum, another important part is gratitude. This song combines both of those pieces:

*I am grateful to be
Lungs breathing, heart beating
Joyous and free
And even when the hard times
Are all around me,
I am grateful to be
Like a bird in the sky
Like a dragonfly
And even like the leaves
All shimmering and green
What lives in them lives in me.*