

Place-based Education at Centre for Learning, Bangalore - from Intent to Action

THEJASWI SHIVANAND
Centre for Learning, Bangalore

This article was published in Sandarbh issue - 91

Centre for Learning has existed on the premise that we can fundamentally examine and challenge our mores and patterns of life and living. If this premise were to be translated to a learning context, then it could include the hard questions that we ask of the roots of the global environmental crisis through which we are currently living. It is imperative we ask these hard questions since we are responsible for *all* the lives with which we share our living space and resources. In the absence of this sense of responsibility, a global meltdown is certain, literally or otherwise.

In the course of educating young people in a rural campus, we have observed that you can try to raise these questions seriously when there is a deep connection with where you live. How well do you know your neighbourhood; who lives where, what do they do, what are their troubles - of human lives, tree lives, owl lives, insect lives. After spending many years in such an environment where there are many opportunities easily available to develop this connection, a young person often finds it valuable to live in a network of relationships, both natural and human. In this value are perhaps located equity, empathy and the recognition of co-existence. It strikes at the root of a central question at CFL – how do we live sanely in an insane, selfish world?

Such a shared philosophy is needed to support curricula and structures that promote thinking about our homes, local environments, and the global situation as well. It is needed so that the situation, when clearly understood, leads to a protective outlook, with emotional connect. In our observation, most educational contexts provide for well-intentioned intellectual appreciation of environmental issues, but they seldom address the continuing nature of the problems. An example of the continuing nature of the problem is the generation and dumping of waste in land, water and air – it does not stop, or slow down despite its well-known effects. We feel that a deep emotional connection to issues is needed to even attempt a crack at the scale of the problem. What better way than develop an emotional connect to your own home and backyard? How do we build this emotional connection?

I would like to share our philosophical thinking behind the need for place-based education. I am interested in sharing our experience and the challenges that we face in our experiment. We will also share the outlines of a curriculum and activities for place-based education as we see it at CFL and how it can be made relevant for a school in any environment. We develop, through this curriculum, an intimate understanding of the land with its geology, forests, watershed, settlements and people, as well as working on the land and taking care of it – organic vegetable gardening, water management, landscaping – and through several other modes of connecting with the land. In our view, it does not require all of us to be in large, well-wooded plots of land like the CFL campus. It can happen in a child's home in a crowded city. Why not?

Translating intent into curricula and action appears to be the invariable challenge that we face in schools, and my questions for this process in Centre For Learning are inescapably inclusive of questions on nature and the place where we live.

What questions?

'Is that a real snake?' is a question that emerges with startling inevitability when people see a photograph of a child in CFL handling a snake. Often, a flood follows the initial query: Are children not afraid of snakes? Have there been incidents of snakes biting children? And well, many more, often exasperating questions! I wonder at the increasing number of apartment children who are unfamiliar with snakes and routinely live in morbid fear of these retiring creatures, a fear that extends to lizards, insects, mushrooms and even large flowers! While our evolutionary heritage has endowed us with a fear of poisonous species, there are many snakes out there that are placid, and beautiful, and important members of the local community. How many of us are comfortable or familiar with the daily happenings in the natural world surrounding us? The urban cocoons that we thrive in are teeming with life, to which we are usually oblivious. Given the norm of apartment homes and schools, perhaps the short term unpredictability and long-term unfamiliarity of the natural world incites fear in many of us. As an educator interested in understanding the movement of fear in learning, I am interested in the processes that give rise to it. Nature seems to expose the storehouse of innate and conditioned fear responses, and intimate contact may help us understand some of these movements. Fear may release its grip—as I have seen happen in several children—and this release may facilitate learning. Is there an end to fear itself in being with nature? That I do not know.

I have noticed in some children, and in myself, a strong tendency to get lost in the wonders of nature. While completely immersed in observing flowers, birds and insects, hours pass before self-possession becomes the dominant mode of existence. A bird watcher may be smug about the length of her bird list, for instance. To restate the problem in an educational context, I have often wondered at the causal mechanism in learning anything for its own sake, in the absence of external motivation to learn. A crucial question that an educator grapples with on a daily basis is about the roots of motivation and resistance to learning.

Television documentaries and the World Wide Web have brought the world to our doorstep; their rendition of the living world as a dizzy series of acrobatics and close encounters has perhaps reduced life around us to a slow, boring landscape where nothing much happens. Experiential contact with nature should force us to reconsider this view; close encounters are possible, even if not spectacular, on an everyday scale. The occasional brilliant display in swarms of migrating blue tiger butterflies, the shocking moths around a bright lamp on a stormy night, and the short burst of flaming summer blossoms of the palasha trees punctuate the otherwise regular, interesting patterns and processes that include the daily opening of buds and flowers and the seasonal egg-tadpole-frog cycle.

Some caveats and prescriptions

Are these unrealistic expectations of nature? Even if this is a half-attempt at a philosophical framework for extending the role of nature in education, we are convinced of the real value that close encounters of the natural kind bring to many children. We have seen students survive serious emotional crises on the strength of their relationship with nature; young people deeply caught in the web of relationships can relax in nature: a non-judgemental and non-coercive space. Is nature a cure for the psychological ills of

the human condition? Unlikely. But it is perhaps valuable in holding a mirror to the various movements of the mind.

As an educator I am often in confusion when with children and nature. I have often asked: Can I teach them to observe nature? Should it be open-ended observation or should one intervene? Does nature observation mean acquiring a skill? Does this mean intervention from another who is skilled? Intervention in the form of guiding a specific skill—holding binoculars, giving pointers in sketching and note-taking, providing names of plants, birds, insects—is perhaps useful in documenting and understanding the experience in some common, shared manner. It is also often felt that children must engage with what they encounter, and that directing them is conditioning and narrowing their experience in some sense. An *open, guided* strategy is perhaps the via media to introduce the natural world to children!

Sense of place

In working with children of various ages at CFL, we have attempted many strategies over the years to engage them with nature, and have drawn up a skeletal curriculum of nature activities for the inquiring mind. A long and fruitful association with the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Wynaad, Kerala, has been a constant conceptual and introductory source for many of these activities.

For younger students, we looked at the possibility of the following: comfort with natural surroundings; ability to be quiet in natural surroundings; picking up simple patterns in nature; and sensory exploration—audio-visual, smell, taste, touch, a sense of place. These curricular objectives look at some means and modes of being in contact with nature, and relate to the intent of looking outward, being quiet, and directly experiencing.

Over the years of working with children, we have observed that developing an intimate connection with the local landscape and life is essential in relating to the natural world. In a campus of several acres of woodland, surrounded by a rocky and forested landscape, we have an excellent resource for developing this sense of place. With the youngest students, activities take the form of nature walks with quiet periods and solo time, sketching in a nature journal, and simple exercises in sensory exploration. They have favourite locations where they cluster and play. When we question children, we notice that their familiarity with the location extends to some knowledge of changes happening at that place: perhaps a new caterpillar, bird, flower or fruit. On walks outside campus, they encounter life in nooks and cracks as they clamber over rocks to play —banyan saplings, balsams, ferns, owls, lizards, geckos, skinks and snakes. They are often excited at seeing something new—a dead dragonfly or butterfly, a Gloriosa lily —and have many questions relating to form and function, some of which may be sophisticated for their age. There is often a detailed familiarity with life around their favourite rocks and spots on campus and outside: trees, ferns, birds, insects.

The sophistication in questions progresses with age, and can take on ecological overtones of inquiring into interconnectedness. Questions on species identity and taxonomy and rocks remain, and strengthen, and the learning process makes the ancient neighbourhood of granite that is over two and a half billion years old a fascinating place to be for the ten- to twelve-year-olds. The idea of a continuously inhabited ancient land is often startling to encounter. We hone in on the sense of place by revisiting locations and exploring habitats on campus over seasons, surveying the

landscape through long walks and camping in the nearby forests, and sketching. Children are also involved in taking care of the school aquarium and dogs. In relating to other living forms, we hope there will result a recognition of the common themes of life and living things.

Identities begin to emerge in adolescence and along with this comes a dip or an upswing in the students' interest in the natural world. Quite a few older students are ardent bird-watchers or butterfly enthusiasts by now, birds and butterflies being the most flamboyant and visible faces of diversity in the surroundings. Several are drawn to the many species of seasonal wildflowers and reptiles as well. These students survey the biodiversity of the campus and the surrounding forests, and contribute to a detailed knowledge of life there through inventories, life-history studies and chronicles of seasonal change. Exercises like mapping parts of the campus or the agriculture-forest mosaic in the surroundings allow them to access parts of the campus and beyond that are usually not in daily focus. They also bring in issues of living in a human-dominated and modified landscape on a larger scale. The various aspects of the landscape—forest, watershed, rural and urban settlements—and their connectivity can become questions of study. The local questions can transform to a larger scale, and our General Studies programme looks at social and environmental issues in this wider context. Questions of livelihood, human rights, large-scale displacements and migration, food security, challenges faced by agricultural landscapes, the future of freshwater, become important questions at this age. The complexity of human society's interaction with the environment, the harmonies and the maladies are explored in depth. For many, the depth of familiarity with the land translates to a depth of affection and connection.

Students of all ages travel away from campus, visit wilderness areas elsewhere in India and meet people working and living in these areas. The Western Ghats, Kutch, Bastar, the Himalayas, and Arunachal Pradesh are some of the places they have visited. Some of the oldest children may spend from a few weeks to many months apprenticing with people who work and live in these places.

Some questions remain...

In educating a small number of mostly urban, middle-class children, I am often faced with the question: What is the motivation behind this nature education? In our rapidly changing world, where drastic action is called for at all levels—social, economic, political and psychological—a deeper understanding of the impact of our actions and an attitude of care for the land is sorely needed. And this is where the nature education programmes of schools like CFL can make an impact. Another question often asked is: Can these programmes be scaled up to larger geographical spans? Given sufficient interest in policymakers and teacher training/educators, perhaps they can. Whether these programmes will survive the existence of an atmosphere of external motivators such as achievement and success, I do not know; I will hazard that they may not.

These programmes need not depend on a rural setting with a large enclosed campus; they can be suitably modified for urban and rural schools with differing constraints—usually the lack of natural or wooded spaces in the former; and overburdened teachers with limited resources and motivation in both types of locations. I fear that the programme I have outlined here might be dismissed as elitist and misplaced in the reality of poverty and lack of education infrastructure. While it is impossible to deny the challenges involved in distribution of scarce resources, it is the diminishing nature of these resources that are the very heart of the matter. The urban, and the rich continue

to consume in an increasingly disastrous spiral, resulting in tremendous waste and disparity. In this juncture, I can only claim that the environmental education we propose puts these crucial resources where they ought to be, in the limelight, and people can draw from our experience, to suit their schools wherever they may be located, it is immaterial if the schools are rich or poor. The issues are of all our land, lives and the planet's future.

The policy decision of introducing environmental science as a compulsory theme across all ages is a good beginning, but its transformation into an examination subject makes it sterile and abstract, frequently disengaged from close observation of the immediate surroundings. This curricular aspect needs a thorough overhaul to include more contact than content. In the new environmental education, we need to go beyond recycling paper, and having solar panels on the school campus. Understanding nature needs intimate contact, and this renewed relationship can open a new way of looking at the world and, perhaps, of living in it.