Applying an Ethic of Care to Environmental Education: Insight from a Study of Outdoor Educators

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Abstract

Recently, there has been an increase in scholarship regarding the incorporation of values in environmental education (EE). A major response to this important issue focuses on teaching students how to apply rational reasoning based on the principles of justice and its derivatives to environmental issues. This approach while highly commendable and theoretically appealing ignores the emotional aspects inherent to ethical development and peoples thinking about environmental issues. Nel Noddings interpretation of an ‘ethic of care’ provides an alternative way of incorporating both feeling and reasoning in teaching environmental values. In this paper I describe how one group of educators has translated an ethic of care into pedagogical practice in their context. The insights are derived from a study of outdoor educators work with EE.

Keywords

Environmental education; outdoor education; ethics of care; place-based education

Introduction

Early on, it was well-established that EE has knowledge, behavioral and ethical components (UNESCO, 1975). However a look at the relevant literature shows that while over the years many scholars have focused on the knowledge and behavioral components of EE, the ethical dimension has received less attention. For example, in their landmark editorial “Yes, EE does have a Definition and Structure”, Hungerford, Peyton and Wilke (1983), leaders in the newly fledged field, described EE as a process of teaching people environmental science knowledge and shaping behaviors in pro-environmental ways to get people to adopt ‘the new environmental paradigm’ (NEP). This situation in the early EE movement was seized upon by some, like Sanera & Shaw (1996) who in their book “Facts not Fear”, indicted educators for taking an indoctrinatory approach to EE. At the heart of their argument was the suggestion that the ethical component of EE was being dealt with by many educational programs in an underhanded way which focused on negative emotions such as guilt, fear, and shame; and manipulative notions of education.

Partly in response to this type of criticism and the growing acceptance a more positive treatment of the ethical component of EE was necessary to empower people, several later scholars took up the challenge of developing such a response. A major outcome of that effort which many today still endorse can be described as the democratic principles (or justice) approach to EE (e.g. Bonnett, 1999; Jensen & Schnack, 1997; Ohman, 2004). Simply described, this latter approach suggests the application of principles such as justice, equity, rights, responsibilities and duties, which many modern western societies are founded on, for educating about values and decision making with respect to environmental issues. However, while the democratic response is highly commendable and theoretically appealing it is not without its criticisms. To a certain extent it does not erase Sanera & Shaw’s (1996) original criticism that EE is indoctrinatory at its core, since as critics explain, it requires people to apply abstract democratic principles to their everyday life in ways they have never been asked to before (for example, extending human rights to the non-human world, and taking substantial responsibility for future generations)—tasks that inherently require high levels of cognitive functioning and pre-existing levels of ethical development beyond the average level. Furthermore, others point to the well-established fact that peoples’ environmental values are intrinsically intertwined with deep emotions (Kollmuss &
Agyeman, 2002), an aspect the democratic approach generally has very little to say about, assuming rather that everyone will already have a proper feeling for the environment or that it will be easy to rationally convince them to do so.

This paper explores another response to treating the ethical component of EE, through the application of an ethic of care. I suggest that Nel Noddings’ interpretation of an ethic of care provides a useful framework for incorporating values in EE programs. Over the years several have written about the application of the ethics of care to EE (e.g. Fein, 2003; Martin, 2007; Russell & Bell, 2000. But a look at this literature shows that little work has been done on the practical application of the ethics of care to EE. This paper addresses this gap. I draw upon a larger study of outdoor educators work with EE, which I conducted for my doctoral thesis (Nazir, 2013), to show how study participants in that context interpret an ethic of care and how they have transformed it into pedagogical practice in EE.

Ethics of Care

Ethics of care originated in the work of Carol Gilligan (1977). Prior to Gilligan, major theories guiding values education, prescribed ethical development in terms of the inculcation of people into the use of principles (virtues or notions of democratic justice), to determine their values and make values-based decisions. Working in this vein Lawrence Kohlberg (1983), for example, describes ethical development as a six stage, cognitive developmental process, which involves the movement of an individual from selfish irrational interests to selfless, rationally principled reasoning over time. His system of ethics education requires immersing students in a series of ethical dilemmas to encourage cognitive growth through the application of the principles of justice in an ever spiraling fashion, until they could make rationally principled just decisions on their own.

Gilligan’s (1977) work seriously questioned this type foundation for ethical development. While studying a group of women, contemplating having abortions, she found a traditional justice and virtue orientations inadequate in understanding the value positions of her participants. In describing their value positions and explaining their decisions, the women studied rarely described their decisions as being based on principles of fairness, equity or even virtues of good and evil. Rather, they seemed to rely on feelings— theirs and others— and an intuitive sense of what was best for their immediate relational group (friends and family). Maintaining relationships and feelings of attachment seemed particularly important in judging what was best. Gilligan concluded that the women approached ethical issues from a different orientation. She characterized this orientation as ‘the voice of care’. Gilligan’s insights were quickly picked up and further elaborated by other scholars (e.g. Held, 2005; Lyons, 1983). However, while over the years work on the ethics of care has continued in various directions, Nel Noddings (1999, 2002, 2003), has been instrumental in developing an ethic of care in relation to educational contexts. Her interpretation of an ethic of care is characterized by the following features. It:

- Defines the self as connected in relation to others even if they (the others) have their own interests and situations;
- Emphasizes the themes of interdependence, connection, and responsiveness of living beings to one another;
- Construes problems as issues of relationships or of response. The spirit of care can be summarized as: maintaining relationships; promoting the welfare of others; and relieving
the burdens, hurts, and suffering of others. The primary concern is with maintaining caring relations rather than primarily acting virtuously or fairly;

- Is not reliant on abstract principles. An ethic of care asks people to turn to memories of caring; picture themselves as ideal carers; and then always act so as to maintain and enhance caring relationships. In so doing the care orientation places great emphasis on feeling. However care does not discard reason. Rather there is an acceptance that there are different ways to care. Indeed, Noddings has suggested that for full moral development, justice and care need to act in tandem, with justice serving as a handmaiden of care. In other words, moral maturity requires a person to see from both ways, and be able to act from a position of justice rooted in care; and

- Views problems as unique and highly contextualized. The focus is on seeking out what is best for all involved in particular situations. Doing so, entails understanding what it means to care in context.

Within the field of education, Noddings has developed a care-based model of values education for use in classrooms. This model proposes that children should be taught to be competent carers and sensitive cared fors. It consists of four components:

1. Modeling: Teachers show what it means to care;

2. Dialogue: Engaging students in talk that is open-ended, engrossing, shifting and attentive to the feelings of others. Talk here, is not debate. Its purpose is not to win the argument or persuade others that one position is more logical or justifiable. Rather, the point is to create or restore caring relations;

3. Practice: Providing opportunities for students to engage in care-giving activities;

4. Confirmation: Praising instances of care that are in consonance with reality for others so as to bring out the best in them.

Building on this foundation, competent carers can then be taught to democratically examine issues, choose values, and make decisions.

**Application of Care to EE**

Over the years several authors have provided compelling arguments for applying an ethic of care to EE. Three of these are Fien (2003), Martin (2007), and Russell and Bell (2000). For Russell and Bell (2000) care is seen as a motivator for political action for the environment. They maintain that care-based thinking can be used to raise the status of the non-human world to an equal other in peoples’ hearts and minds. Political action for the environment becomes understandable and desirable since an equal other is deserving of equitable treatment. For Fien (2003) incorporating an ethic of care into EE provides the opportunity for students to see and learn to love the Earth as a broadened sense of self. Fien also argues that care opens the door to broadening the theoretical framework for EE to include the humanities, arts, philosophy, and ethics. For Martin (2007), the true potential of care in environmental education is to increase a sense of unison between the self and the non-human world as co-dependent, relational and inseparable. Caring allows people to develop a personal, loving relationship with the environment, which in turn can act as a basis for thinking and acting for it. According to Martin (2007, p. 62):
Caring as environmental education demands that students work at getting to know nature. Caring demands that a sense of proximity be created by having students engaged in experiencing, learning and sharing time with nature in the same sorts of ways we might get to know a new friend. In such caring for nature, students need to understand their relatedness to the environment as a subjective relationship, individual to individual. Caring for nature is also a challenge to any form of education that interprets nature as an external generic object, or set of objects. Rather, environmental caring education must seek to understand both rationally and emotionally the places, entities and nonhuman individuals with who students develop specific personal lived relationships.

In my opinion, it is Martin who reflects most closely the spirit of care that Nodding discusses and provides the most compelling vision of the potential of applying an ethic of care to EE. In the next section of this paper I describe a practical example of the application of care to EE. Insight is presented from a study done for my doctoral thesis which interrogated the nature of EE at an outdoor education centre.

**Care-Based EE in Practice: The Case of Faraway Dale**

Faraway Dale is an outdoor education centre located in a large city in east central Canada. It is owned and operated by a major provincial school board. The facility, which has been used for outdoor educational purposes for over 50 years, consists of 55 hectares of natural green space encompassing meadow, forest, marsh and river habitats. It forms part of a natural wildlife corridor so that encounters with wildlife are common occurrences on any trip to the centre. Faraway Dale serves the urban and suburban student population within its vicinity. It accommodates a steady stream of K-8 classes on daylong visits throughout the school year. Among several other goals, Faraway Dale has been mandated to provide EE as part of its educational efforts.

For my doctoral thesis I studied the work of Faraway Dale’s outdoor educators with EE. I used a phenomenological case study methodology (van Manen, 1997) to illuminate the essence of EE at Faraway Dale. Using a phenomenological methodology meant that I focused on the experience of participants (outdoor educators) with the phenomenon (environmental education) Nine educators were participants in the study, who at that time, had each already worked at least ten years at the facility. During the research project all seemed passionate about EE and seemed to share the same basic idea of what it should be about. The four men and five women are referred to later on in this section by the following pseudonyms: Bruce, Danny, Keith, Trevor, Carol, Kelly, Neesha, Arlene, and Ellen. The study took place over five months during which I visited the centre regularly on daylong visits. Data collection focused on re-presenting their salient experiences in providing EE at the centre. Data analysis focused on analysing the re-presented experiences to determine the essential structures that characterise EE at the centre. While data analysis yielded ten structures which I believe embody the essence of EE at Faraway Dale, in this paper I draw on those that illuminate: educators’ interpretation of care, and examples of how care has been translated into pedagogical practice.

**Educators’ Interpretation of Care**
Educators’ at Faraway Dale have developed particular understandings of care and strong commitments to it. They interpret care in two main ways: as a foundation of education and as a way to relate to nature.

**Education as a care based endeavor**

During the study it became clear that Faraway Dale educators’ support for care-based environmental education stemmed from a deeper understanding of all education being a care-based endeavor. This was indicated in their general talk about education, what it means and how it should operate. For example:

> The education we do here is about getting kids outdoors learning and having fun, transforming people through the heart and emotions. (Arlene, Interview 1, p. 8)

> A good activity has lots of parts and pieces. You can engage anybody in the class. If you have someone who does not want to participate, you can have them off to the side being something minor. They don’t have to be the heartwood or centre of attention role. (Trevor, Field Visit 2, p. 1)

These are just a few of the many quotations that illustrate the care-based roots that guide these educators’ understanding and practice of education. Arlene’s comment demonstrates an educational orientation that is more than cognitive targeting the emotions and spirit rather than the mind alone and the relational turn to their practice, in that the focus is on transforming people rather than simply completing programs and activities. Trevor’s comment demonstrates how the educators endeavor to support the growth of compassionate carers and sensitive cared fors, by providing positive caring educational experiences that are context dependent, inclusive and cater to the diversity of learning styles students may exhibit.

**Nature as living sacred “Other” and natural teacher**

Early on in the research process, all the participants identified a care-based relational orientation to the environment as one they most closely identify with in the personal lives. This came across in the way they spoke about nature and their own association with it:

> I see nature as being a necessary place for humans to spend time, to be still, and to be quiet. To kind of reconnect and to recognize that humans are part of the natural world...So for me when I am in nature, I feel I am very much a part of it. (Danny, Interview 1, p. 7)

Throughout the research process they also conveyed the notion that nature is a living, conscious Other of intrinsic worth rather than a commodity or thing that humans have a right to selfishly exploit. The linguistic devices (metaphors, similes, pronouns and adjectives) they most often used when speaking about the non-human world were those one would use when talking about a living, conscious being. Bruce, for example, referred to nature as ‘Mother’ (Bruce, Interview 1, p.13) in describing his own relationship to her. In addition to being a living Other, several participants ascribed transcendent or more than ordinary qualities to nature. They described the natural world as amazing, mysterious, magical, therapeutic, exciting, and ingenious. For example:
To me nature is ingenious! How did a tree figure out how to bend itself to get to the light? How did something like a burr, which is a seed, figure out how to stick itself onto a body so it can be taken to another place and develop and grow in a new location? (Trevor, Interview1, p. 9)

At the same time, it was clear that they strive not to convey the idea of nature or the natural environment in a disneyfied way; that is, as a human dressed up in animal skins or leaves. They are clear that non-human Otherness has a will and power of its own so that nature can be “fun but dangerous” (Danny, Final Interview, p. 6) and “unpredictable” (Keith, Field Visit 1, p. 2). Several also built on these themes to express the view that, nature is a natural teacher who can teach many things, far beyond what books and people can.

I think when you put yourself at the mercy of the environment and nature it takes care of you to a certain extent, and teaches you lessons. Sometimes nature can be really tough with you and it doesn’t seem to care whether you’re ready or not. You just have to learn this lesson right here, right now. (Trevor, Interview1, p. 15)

For me these educators are implying that the human-nature relationship is more than physical—it has emotional and sacred dimensions to it.

Translation of Care into Pedagogical practice

In addition to talking about it, educators at Faraway Dale have developed strategies to translate care into pedagogical practice for EE. Four of these are described below.

Modeling care for students- Educators infuse the notion of care across programs by modeling it themselves. This is done in several ways. Students are viewed as valuable others to be treated with gentleness, respect, and individualized, personal attention. Long before they come to Faraway Dale information is elicited from their schools and accompanying teachers so that special accommodations can be made for them. To meet special needs, educators are always prepared to use special equipment like audio amplifiers and outdoor wheelchairs if required. According to Neesha this is nothing remarkable but rather “just another part of the job at Faraway Dale” (Neesha, Field Visit 2, p. 3). The centre also stocks a large supply of coats, gloves, boots, hats and rain coats to supplement students own gear, so they will be comfortable during the visit. This is especially important during winter months.

In students’ presence, educators are very careful to treat nature and the natural environment gently and respectfully. They take care not to step on baby trees and tree roots; stick to pathways so as to disrupt the environment as little as possible; remove bits of garbage they find in the forest; and handle animals carefully and respectfully if they need to. Also, in discussing the natural world with students, educators use positive metaphors and relational language to encourage students to think of the non-human aspects of the Earth as conscious Others worthy of our love and respect, rather than as resources for us to exploit, or monsters to be scared of or disgusted by. For example, on an occasion of spotting a deer on a hike, Trevor spontaneously used the phrase, “The deer showed itself to us” (Trevor, Field Visit 3 p. 1), in recalling the incident during my post-visit interview with him later in the day, implying that the deer was a willing, active agent in the in the event. This type of relational language was used extensively by all the educators on many other occasions.
Explicitly dialoguing about care to students- At the beginning of each daytrip, the first student activity is the Group Introduction. This usually takes the form of an informal group chat. In it, educators try to familiarize themselves with the students, preview the day ahead and make students comfortable. An ethic of care is strongly and explicitly introduced during this time. While all educators have their own pedagogical methods, during data collection I saw this done in three basic ways. The first was ‘No pick, No pull, No pocket’. In Ellen’s words, during her introductory talk to one group of students, “We have a few rules we live by here at Faraway Dale. And one of the most important ones is ‘no pick, no pull, no pocket’. The forest needs everything it has, so let’s leave it as we find it’ (Field Notes, p. 39). Arlene and Bruce took a more involved approach to introducing students to their idea of care. They began by telling students that ‘care’ is an important part of how Faraway Dale operates. They then wrote the letters C, A, R, E vertically on a whiteboard and invited students to suggest words that demonstrate care. From student suggestions, appropriate words were written on the board to complete an acronym for C.A.R.E reflective of an ethic of compassionate care. Students were asked to demonstrate care, as they themselves had defined it, throughout the rest of day. A third way that a care based orientation to nature was introduced during this portion of the day was in educator responses to student apprehensions about Faraway Dale. It was common for many students to express fears about being hurt by wild animals they may encounter on outdoor activities during the Group Introduction. One response to this fear, that seemed particularly effective with students, was provided by Trevor, who invited students to adopt an attitude of care instead of apprehension or disgust, “Instead of being scared or disgusted by the animal be curious and interested. Instead of screaming, “Ahhhh”…Stroke your chin and say, “Hmm…How interesting” (Field Notes, p. 25).

Providing opportunities for practice- A daytrip to Faraway Dale provides opportunities for students to grow in the practice of care. One of these are highlighted here. A signature feature of any trip to Faraway Dale is the provision of have direct experiences with nature. In Arlene’s words, “Faraway Dale is a place to encounter nature face to face, brain to brain and heart to heart” (Field Notes, p. 43). These experiences provide opportunities for students to demonstrate care towards the non-human world. For example, one activity that students participate in is Touch a Bug. In it, students are invited to physically interact with an invertebrate animal by picking it up and allowing it to walk on the palm of their hands. The animal is always collected from its natural environment such as the compost heap or under a log. Much care is taken to only choose safe animals such as slugs, snails or earthworms. After interacting with the animal, and observing it, students are always required to return the animal to its natural habitat in a care-filled way. On the occasions I witnessed this activity, not all students were keen to touch a bug. But for those that did, the effect was powerful, particularly if they had not done so before. They usually named it in the Debriefing Session later in the day on as one of their most memorable experiences of the day. Trevor explained that while such activities may seem trivial and a bit silly they are also intimate. “You open yourself up to something when you do that” (Trevor, Field Visit 1, p. 3). In my opinion such experiences open the self to the practice of caring through physical connection. For me this comment also highlights a bigger importance of care in EE. An ethic of care emphasizes and engages positive emotions and actions rather than negative ones in the teaching/learning process. This represents an important difference from some environmental education programs, which have been sharply criticised for fostering negative emotions of guilt and fear, and leaving children hopeless and disempowered (Sanera & Shaw, 1996) about environmental problems.
Confirming caring behaviors- Throughout the day educators overtly recognize and praise any instances when students demonstrate care for each other and/or the natural world. While I observed this on many field visits, one incident stands out in my mind. On my third field visit with Arlene, one student was particularly careful in handling a snail to the extent that the creature made no attempt to escape but chose to stay with the child, for quite some time crawling from hand to hand. Arlene used this as a teachable moment with the group to point out a stellar example of care in action. Later she explained to me that the incident was a rare but almost perfect practical demonstration of the type of relational care for the natural world that educators at the centre seek to foster in students. It needed to be highlighted to the whole group.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier several scholars and educators have provided compelling arguments of what it can offer EE. While the details of these arguments differ, they are all based on the premise that emotions are intrinsic aspects of people’s environmental values/decision making, and should be a part of any strategy for environmental education. This paper offers vivid pedagogical examples of how care has been applied to EE by educators in one context. At a deeper level these examples provide us with thought provoking insight about the application of ethic of care to EE.

Firstly, in her work Noddings describes a model for care-based education for educators to use in classrooms. This model proposes that children should be taught to be competent carers and sensitive cared fors and consists of four components: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Faraway Dale’s educators provide working examples of what each of these can look like in the context of EE. A second point that the work of Faraway Dale’s educators demonstrates is that care-based EE inherently focuses on positive emotion. At the beginning of this paper I described the two other ways through which environmental educators approach the ethical aspect of EE: the indoctrinatory approach and the democratic principles (justice) approach. While both approaches have been criticized for not dealing adequately with the emotional aspects of ethical development, the indoctrinatory approach has been further criticized for its use of negative emotions such as guilt, fear and shame. Care-based environmental education provides another option. An ethic of care inherently utilizes positive emotions (care and love) as part of ethical thinking and decision-making processes and provides affirmative educational experiences for students. Finally, the work of Faraway Dale educators also highlights some of the problematic aspects of incorporating an ethic of care into EE which educators in all contexts may face. Their work reinforces the important point that care is not something that can be taught as one would teach other topics. It cannot be added on to a program but must be part of the foundation of the educational effort. For educators at Faraway Dale, an ethic of care is a fundamental aspect of education, that is, they see all education is a care-based endeavor. Further they view care as a natural way of relating to the non-human world. Their work with EE springs from these foundations, so that in their pedagogical activities care is not an add-on but rather a wellspring from which their practice flows. In concluding this paper, I ask all environmental educators to rethink how they treat with the ethical dimensions of EE. Further in light of the fact that values are emotionally embedded I suggest educators reconsider an ethic of care for their own pedagogical context.

References