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44/2023

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Emotional Affinity of Children Toward Nature

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Abstract. The aim of the current study is to investigate the role of emotional closeness towards nature in a sample of children from Iraq aged (4-9) years, passion towards nature develops through experiences with nature during childhood and that contact with nature, which can vary from green spaces in cities to landscapes have a really positive impact on many aspects of children's lives from social interaction with each other to cooperation and play freely. The theoretical part, describes the basics in which children's affinity towards nature is developed by national curriculum, both in Iraq and Romania. The results showed that in nature, children become expressive and eager to play with each other freely and break free of parental restrictions. Our results support the idea that closeness and experiences in nature are one possible way to stimulate pro-environmental intentions in children. This extends to previous studies showing that growing up near nature and spending time in nature are predictors of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords. Community with Nature, Emotion, Nature affinity, Nature, children

Introduction

Globalization has resulted in the development of technologies, as well as formal and fundamental changes in learning. According to the principles that define today's society, young people have an increasing number of opportunities for training. Education is seen as institutionalized and instrumentalized in the postmodern era, pursuing specific goals and objectives. A pragmatic society creates an appropriate education in accordance with the various principles that set it in motion. Thus, the concept of bringing together several disciplinary profiles to investigate the complexity of the world around us, claiming holism and globalization, and connecting different sides of knowledge.

The rapid evolution of society, the analysis of contemporary problems, and the identification of major themes of meditation have resulted in the establishment of specific answers through new education in terms of education. The list of new educations can change over time as new disciplines emerge or existing ones fade away. Peace education, environmental education, education for participation and democracy, demographic education, education for change and development, education for communication and media, nutrition education, modern economic and home education, time free education, environmental education, human rights education, and so on are some of the related disciplines. These are

confirmed by the introduction of new disciplines, each focusing on a specific type of education, the development of specific modules within traditional disciplines, or the infusion of messages related to new contents into traditional disciplines. These new forms of education have emerged as complementary solutions that situate school practices in the millennium's scientific and socio-cultural universe. (Stern, 2000).

Nowadays, traditional education provides a lot of information with little, if any, connection between subjects. Nature education teaches us that this connection is essential for children's optimal development, knowledge transmission, and deeper understanding. Nature education also encourages us to form interpersonal bonds. Acceptance, understanding, and goodwill must exist between the child and the teacher or between the child and other children. Nowadays, we have a tendency to confine the educational process within four walls. Some preschools, schools, and universities choose to hold classes in kind only on rare occasions. Children make too little contact with nature, which means that they do not have a concrete experiential learning based on what they see, touch, hear or smell. We are all aware that the world is experiencing climate change on a daily basis, but the fact that we live longer inside buildings than outside them prevents us from considering what this means. And, as a student, you must feel and see what a change in nature means in order to better understand the environment in which you live. The educational systems must be constantly adapted to changes in the environment, both natural and technological or other factors. (Hinds & Sparks, 2008).

Theoretical frame

“Let the children go free; encourage their attraction to nature; let the children run outside when it rains; to take off their shoes when they find puddles of water and when the grass on the meadow is wet with dew and they want to tread it barefoot; let the children rest in peace when a tree invites them into its shade, when they shout and laugh, when the sun awakens them in the morning, as any being who divides his day between wakefulness and sleep awakens.” - these are the exhortations of Maria Montessori from the book “Child Discovery”, considering that only in the middle of nature, children manifest and value their true individual developmental abilities. Children are born natural explorers. Living in the city, in the so-called civilized world, means giving up a life in nature, having few opportunities to come into contact with it or to have a direct experience with nature. (Bilton, 2010).

The influence of nature on a child's education was frequently viewed solely as a moral factor, with the goal of developing feelings for flowers, plants, animals, and so on. As a result, the most important aspect was overlooked: muscular stimulation and emotional affinity towards nature. Schultz explains “exploration Outdoors should be included in All stages of early childhood education from nursery to the end of primary school, not only for the psychological and health benefits it provides to the human body, but also to allow children to develop new areas of interest in knowing the world around them. Children should be allowed to get to know nature closely through their special abilities to touch and explore things at their own pace, know the wonders of nature, and feel the world around them”. (Schultz, 2000).

Children who spend time outside are happier and healthier as a result. Children become calmer, have greater concentration, And they are better able to regulate their emotions as a result. We can say that many studies in this field show that exposure to nature enhances creativity, innovation, imagination, freedom of action and curiosity, as well as the development of critical thinking skills. Based on these findings, various scientific works have been written in order to instill in children a love of nature, arousing latent or lost feelings. Education, like any other field and in the field of nature, can provide children with reasons to be active as well

as knowledge that will pique their interest. The child is the most spontaneous observer of nature, and he undoubtedly feels the need to have a material to work with.

According to Blachford & Baines “Children learn about their role as custodians of the Earth and all its creatures, great and small” (Blachford & Baines, 2006). through these experiences. Excursions to the forest or animal farms allow the child to make many discoveries and assimilate basic knowledge about nature and the environment. Furthermore, outdoor play improves motor coordination and balance, as well as taking some risks that are not dangerous, which is essential for the development of children's self-esteem. Nature has a powerful influence on children, with the ability to heal, calm, energize, and inspire gratitude and grace. (Blachford & Baines, 2006).

Nature and emotions

Emotional affinity toward nature, in case of children, means that their desire to explore in nature and to play and learn is determined by emotion rather than reason. A purely rational or cognitive explanation for nature-protective behavior is insufficient. It also means that it is a newly conceptualized construct, that focuses on emotional motivations of this behavior. The role of emotional affinity toward nature was investigated by many researchers, and it was found that it significantly contributes to willingness for pro-environmental commitment, whereas contact with nature has no direct impact on this willingness.

The four most important aspects of emotions that show affinity for nature are presents as it follows:

- love and care for nature;
- the feeling of freedom in nature;
- the feeling of security in nature;
- being one with nature, the feeling of belonging.

Individuals can learn about their relationship with the natural environment, the relationship between certain elements of the ecosystem, personal relationships with others, but especially the relationship with the personal self, by exposing themselves to natural environments. (Raudsepp, 2005).

Pupils and students have the opportunity to develop their imagination, vocabulary, and certain social skills through education in nature, also called outdoor education. Collaborative activities foster the development of transversal competencies with a social component. Children learn to trust their own ideas when they are encouraged to investigate, ask questions, and find solutions. Each object in the classroom has its own place and role, meeting the needs of every student of any age. All the more so because the resources found in nature stimulate learning experiences due to their diversity and nature. (Chrisholm, 2007).

The desire of children to be socially accepted is the most important aspect of their young age. Strong emotions manifest as stress and irritability and can be combated through interrelationships. The frustrations that arise inside the classroom are gradually eliminated when the classroom doors are opened and the children are exposed to activities in the natural environment. Children share objects and ideas much more easily in nature because they calm down and learn to interact when they are surrounded by trees, water, and fresh air. Respect and concern for all living things are also developing, and children who understand the importance of the plants and animals around them develop the ability to find personal ways to protect and preserve the environment.

The emotional benefits of practicing education in nature include activity, respect, responsibility, inclusion, and feelings of security, freedom, and the development of self-

confidence and self-esteem. Children who are more withdrawn usually find themselves in nature and, without being restricted by anyone, choose to befriend and develop relationships with other members of the group. Emotional intelligence, or the ability of children to learn to react correctly to various unforeseen life situations or certain conflicts, can be developed. (Wells, 2000).

Another aspect of emotions that can be developed through learning in nature is the sense of freedom, which is a right of every individual. Even though every human being is born with it, it must be re-learned. Other people's pressures, as well as experiences and life circumstances, significantly reduce this sense. It is critical that each child regains his or her freedom to study, think, explore, and express himself through education. Children are subject to group discipline rules beginning in pre-school. That is the location and time when he first encounters the limitation of his own freedom. This gradually increases as the preschooler becomes a student and is required to follow other school rules. Students gradually lose their sense of freedom as they progress through middle and high school. Because they are used to being told what to do and how to do it, they lose their decision-making abilities, independence, creativity, self-reliance, and initiative.

These skills appear as goals at the end of a learning cycle in the educational ideals of various systems around the world. The right to free expression and the freedom of each child to develop personally, as well as a member of a group, are also stated in the educational ideal. Because of the way we study nowadays, students risk losing certain liberties during the educational process. The external environment assists those who have completely lost their sense of freedom, as well as those who want to reclaim certain elements that they believe they no longer have, such as freedom in choosing learning content, study mode, personal time allocated to learning, their own pace of development, or even certain fears regarding the expression of their own ideas or learning outcomes. (Raudsepp, 2005).

It is the same in case of the sense of security. A child who is restricted and does not feel at ease will never show initiative or creativity. The natural environment is beneficial in both granting freedom in children's play activities and providing a sense of freedom associated with learning. No matter how inclusive a classroom is, both in terms of educational atmosphere and environmental design, students believe that the teacher has control over the events that occur in that space. The same is true in the case of the home, where the parents have control. Students feel liberated in outdoor spaces because there is no nominee to control them. (Mayer & Frantz, 2004).

In case of the last aspect analyzed, being one with nature, it is known that any observation of a child in either of the two spaces, indoors or outdoors, reveals that in the internal environment, he is silent and submissive, not wanting to stand out, and employing resources that do not require too much attention from adults. Instead, in the external environment, children become vocal, eager to play with other children or adults, even playful and energetic, and refuse to use material resources because they find activities that do not necessitate the use of specific tools. (Torkos, 2017).

Education in and with nature and its elements and resources, develops confident people who can solve problems cooperatively and make judgments about themselves, people, or ideas, regardless of the type of outdoor learning used in the educational process or age. These findings do not imply that the classroom should be avoided as a learning environment.

Recent perspectives

The literature discusses the need for and benefits of engaging children in educational activities outside of the classroom. To achieve this, there must be a belief that the effort expended to carry out outdoor education activities in addition to classroom education serves a purpose. This inevitably raises the question of the game's significance, of learning and organizing outdoor activities, and, most importantly, of its constituent components. The positive factors that emerge as a result of the introduction of outdoor education activities in physical, mental, and emotional terms, as a motivation in this sense, are being emphasized more and more frequently. In the Romanian and Iraqi educational contexts, outdoor education is a relatively new concept. Unfortunately, in both countries, educational actors face the problem of separation of children from nature, both in the social life, as in the educational systems. Outdoor education appears to return us to nature, to a recreational way of learning, in this society where education is trying hard to find a path that students can confidently walk towards a goal that everyone dreams of, a path from which the useless information with which they are served disappears, where stress is at normal limits. Man's need to escape into natural space in order to find himself is well documented. We need nature as much as nature needs us, and children must be taught this. Nature was the place where the most primitive types of learning took place until the emergence of new educational doctrines. It can be said that natural space has been the basis of education and its first forms since its inception.

Outdoor programs' philosophy and theory tend to emphasize the effects of the natural environment on humans, the educational role of stress and challenges, and experiential learning. However, before proceeding to the next chapter, which will discuss the benefits of nature education, the philosophical and theoretical foundations on which the concept of outdoor education was founded must be researched. According to one point of view, when engaging in such activities, the participants are at their most cruel and are denied many of the modern conveniences. Participants may become more aware that they are a living part of a large ecosystem and are not restricted by social norms and habits. There is a sense of sincerity and the ability to see others regardless of race, class, or religion. (Kals et al, 1999).

There are numerous things for them to see (animals, birds, leaves), hear (wind, birds chirping), smell (the scent of flowers, the earth soaked in rain), touch (a fluffy caterpillar, bark), and even taste (fresh snow or raindrops on the tongue). Children who spend a significant amount of time gaining experience through television and computers typically use only two senses, which can have a negative impact on their perceptual abilities. Outdoor activities foster children's creativity and imagination, as well as their communication, awareness, reasoning, and observational skills. Children are free to roam. Obesity rates fall, play becomes more creative, and energy is expended through this type of activity.

In both countries, Romania and Iraq, education in nature is far from its full potential. In both countries, outdoor learning activities, are introduced rarely in the educational practice. It is mostly used as a teaching learning or evaluation method. Outdoor education is practiced in some form or another in almost every country on the planet. Depending on the socio-cultural context, it can be implemented in a variety of ways. Outdoor education is regarded as environmental education in some countries, but it is regarded as a completely different practice in others. Outdoor education at the highest level is practiced in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Some forms of outdoor education can also be found in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Teachers are constantly concerned with the criteria for selecting instructional-educational methods to use. Education is constantly evolving and changing, and teachers must

stay current on social and educational developments. Trends are imposed both by students, through their needs and interests, and by society, through the demands they place on themselves on a daily basis. These directions are also established by the management of educational systems, whether local, national, or international, through the policies that they implement and the innovations that they implement in the curricula. These translate into concrete learning activities that are directly educable due to the contents and practices that they employ. Educators and teachers serve as a link between families, schools and society, and they must facilitate and streamline the educational process by becoming familiar with their students' classes, traditional and modern working methods, adapting them to the needs of the group, and constantly updating their knowledge, policies and styles of training.

Methods

Participants

The respondents are children registered in kindergarten in addition to primary school children in the first, second and third grades in Iraq. The schools were selected in urban environments. The questionnaire was answered by a sample of (275) children of both sexes, (146) males, at a rate of (53.1%). (129) of females, with a percentage of (46.9%). Their ages ranged from (4-9) years with an average of (6) years, (14) of them were in the age group (4) years, with a rate of (5.1%) and (41) within the age group (5) years, at a rate of (14.9%) and (56) within the age group (6) years, at a rate of (20.4%), and (63) of them are within the age group of (7) years, at a rate of (22.9%), and (57) within the age group (8) years, at a rate of (20.7) %, and (44) within the age group (9) years, at a rate of (16.0%), demographic data were evaluated to collect gender and age.

Instrument

Emotional Affinity toward Nature (EAN). The original scale measuring EAN was introduced by Kals, Schumacher, and Montada (1999). Amendments were made to the paragraphs to suit the children in Iraq. consisting of (16) items (which include a willingness to protect nature, to be part of nature, love nature, feel belonging to it, and play freely), And add some items. Its psychometric properties of it were calculated, and the degree of Its reliability is reached by Alpha Cronbach's equation (0.94). The subsamples were distributed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample distribution.

	N	%
Urban N	275	
Gender		
Male	146	40.47
female	129	59.52
Age		
4	14	5.1
5	41	14.9
6	56	20.4
7	63	22.9
8	57	20.7
9	44	16.0

Alpha Cronbach's	0.94
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Table 2. below show the results of Emotional Affinity toward Nature (EAN) Scale, including the values of measures of central tendency, some measures of dispersion, and characteristics of the frequency distribution. These numerical data indicate that the sample has the characteristic of representing the community, in light of its distribution approaching the average distribution, as the values of the arithmetic mean, the median, and the mode converges from each other, in addition to the low standard error of the arithmetic mean and the low values of skewness and kurtosis.

Table 2. The results of EAN scale for the participants

Mean	61.51
Std. Error Mean	0.14
Median	68.00
mode	67
Std. Deviation	16.5
Minimum	79
Maximum	16
Skewness	-1.58
Kurtosis	1.06

Results

After performing the statistical processing of the search data using SPSS, the results showed that the mean was (61.51) and the std. deviation (16,5) on the Emotional Affinity Scale and the calculated T-value was (13.5), the average of males was (62.95), and the std. deviation (15.17), and the mean females (59.88), std. deviation (17.86), and the t-value was (9.72), Table 3.

Table 3. mean, std. deviations, T, F for the measured variable.

Variable	M	SD	T	F
Emotional Affinity	61.51	16.5	13.5	
Gender				
Male	62.95	15.17		
Female	59.88	17.88		
				9.72

Discussion

The current study examines the role of emotional affinity toward nature (EAN). The results of the study indicate that children have positive tendencies towards nature, and these positive perceptions are of great benefit during the process of social interaction, as children try to identify themselves in the midst of nature. The role of emotional affinity towards nature (EAN) was investigated by presenting the four most important aspects of emotions that show

an affinity with nature as follows: love and care for nature. Feeling free in nature. Feeling safe in nature. and a sense of belonging. In addition to being prepared to protect nature. Children can learn about their relationship with the natural environment, the relationship between certain elements of the ecosystem, interpersonal relationships with others, and especially the relationship with their personal self by exposing themselves to natural environments for example (Raudsepp, 2005).

The results of the study also confirmed that in nature, children become frank and eager to play with each other freely and get rid of parental restrictions so that they are playful and energetic, and they refuse to use material resources because they find activities that do not require the use of certain tools, for example, a study (Torkos,2017).

The results show that, in line with previous research. (e.g. Kals, Schumacher, & Montada, 1999), Significantly in readiness for pro-environmental conservation.

Our results support the idea that closeness and experiences in nature are one possible way to stimulate pro-environmental intentions in children. This extends to previous studies showing that growing up near nature and spending time in nature are predictors of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. (Chawla, 2009; Chawla, & Cushing, 2007).

Brief exposure to nature can lead to temporary increases in children's attachment to nature and their willingness to protect nature. Over time, these moments may add up to individual meaningful differences. As such, the association with nature appears to complement previous research indicating that early exposure to nature increases children's interest in nature and stimulates pro-environmental behaviors, see also. (Evans et al, 2018).

Individuals are influenced by the cultural environment in which they live. Determines the psychological conditions of both sexes and draws patterns of behavior for each of them. It is known that the changes that have taken place in our societies and the rapid developments of means of communication and others have led us to move away from outdoor. (Ali & Abdulhasan, 2020).

On the contrary, i.e. far from nature argue Ali et al. That keeping adolescents away from open spaces can lead to psychological distress, which needs further intervention through psychotherapy. (Ali et al, 2020 a).

Children reported difficulty in accessing natural places due to the large buildings and the lack of design of green spaces. The places they go to are far from their homes and they go to them at different times, which causes them to feel separated from nature against their will, despite their desire to spend time in nature and play in it and discover birds and insects., that is, there is a residence that is imposed on children, whether by parents or circumstances such as living in crowded areas, lack of green spaces, lack of parks, desire from parents related to fears such as their children being harmed and injured. (Ali,2020).

The results also show that there are important differences between children. First, there are consistent gender influences, showing that males are more connected to nature, spend more time in it, are more aware of environmental risks, and finally show a greater willingness to act in favor of its conservation. These differences lead us to elucidate contextual influences on the development of EAN, and we should be careful in generalizing the findings unless more research is conducted that includes different countries and cultures, and longitudinal data on the stability of emotional affinity towards nature.

We are therefore convinced that there is a strong need to learn more about how childhood affinity for nature is formed on the one hand, and on the other hand, to find effective ways to enhance connection with nature and positive experiences with nature in order to ensure that future generations will feel a connection to nature and the need to protect it. If the positive

feeling toward nature, as argued Hinds & Sparks (2008) Depending on repeated exposure to nature, we must think about how to facilitate these experiences for children. There are many ways that come to mind: creating green areas in cities and schools, incorporating children's spaces into parks and natural sites, doing special activities in zoos and wildlife parks targeting children, and the like.

As a result of children moving away from nature, bullying and hostility behaviors towards others can occur. (Ali & Torkos, 2022).

By this nature, they direct social awareness and interaction in a way that ensures health and well-being so that it leads to bias in the various cognitive processes surrounding With the social awareness of the individual until he becomes more mature. (Ali et al, 2020 b).

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Emotional Affinity Scale

Below are statements that represent the different ways you feel about nature. We are interested to know how you feel about nature. Circle the alternative for each statement based on how much you agree or disagree with the sentence.

Items	Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel separated from nature					
2. I have a deep understanding of how my actions affect the natural world					
3. I am afraid of seeing animals					
4. I don't care much about the dangers nature faces					
5. I feel a deep love for nature					
6. I see that the weather is not ideal for being in nature schools					
7. I want to be in nature					
8. I feel part of the wider natural world					
9. Protecting nature is important to me					
10. I feel a strong connection with nature					
11. I have little experience with wildlife					
12. I am inspired by the intelligence of living things in nature					
13. I think that experiments in nature are one possible way to stimulate pro-environmental intentions					
14. I feel happy away from the normal world					
15. I miss the natural places in the society I live in					
16. Free play in nature improves my mood and social interaction					