Abstract

A large body of literature indicates that young children need direct contact with natural environments for their overall health and wellbeing. Additionally, the Western world is becoming increasingly anxious about children’s separation from nature. In line with these claims, there has been a growing interest in forest programs for young children, which offer unstructured play opportunities in ‘wild’ forest settings. Using hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) as a guiding methodological framework, and the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2004) to collect data with young children, this dissertation sets out to explore four-year old children’s experiences in a forest program in British Columbia. Specifically, I ask “What are four-year-old children’s lived experiences in a forest program?” Six children (five boys, one girl) participated in the study over a five-month period. In addition to video observations, the children participated in ongoing creative data collection methods, including: drawing, photography, child-led tours, and book making. Ongoing conversations between myself and the children and personal reflections on the children’s and my own experiences were integral to the hermeneutic analysis and the hermeneutic circle. Analysis was intertwined with data collection, and was seen as a reflexive process of collecting and interpreting experiences (van Manen, 1990). Findings from this study showed that the children’s experiences ranged from self-nurturing and positive experiences, social dynamics and empathy for other-than-human living world, challenging experiences of fear, dislike, weakness, and pain, experiences of imagination, experiencing curiosity, as well as experiences of thrill and risk-taking. Drawing from these insights I conclude with several educational implications related to forest programs for pre-school children.

Keywords: early childhood experiences; early childhood forest programs; hermeneutic phenomenology; Mosaic approach.