Abstract

This research examines moral development in relation to the natural world within three elementary aged children and one public elementary school teacher. This work is based on several ethical starting points: 1) that entities within the natural world have intrinsic value and agency, 2) that we are interdependent with each other and 3) that we should therefore act with humility and caution. These considerations gave rise to a new methodological approach called ‘eco portraiture’, which builds upon questions and lessons arising from direct contact with the natural world so that the more-than-human remains in foreground of the research methodology itself. This work extends Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) conceptions of ‘portraiture’ as a methodology to also include arts-based explorations of place. This research took place on a weekly basis for a total of two years at a public elementary school focused on ecological education. Two themes regarding moral development were uncovered: ‘empathy’ and ‘belonging’.

Empathy took the form of a developing ‘eco sensitivity’ in these students. Central to this type of moral development were particular ways of attending, valuing and listening to the more-than-human. These processes acted as roots for a type of ecological care to grow. Taking these life experiences seriously, this research proposes that young children are not inherently ‘egoistic’ as traditional developmental theorists such as Piaget (1932) and Mead (1934) have argued, learning to extend care outwards as they differentiate themselves from others, rather that they are relational. Phenomenologist Kleinberg-Levin (2008) suggests at this early stage, there is a “reversible communicative relationship with nature” that is working to shape and inform the child (p.61). I argue that if an educator diligently works on cultivating this notion of empathy, there is the potential for the child’s moral orientation not to exclude or background the natural world but rather welcome it as an active teacher. This notion of empathy is then paired with the concept of belonging as feeling part of the human and more-than-human community was essential in building confidence and courage in these children. This appeared to be important in resisting dominant cultural norms that may be working against an ecological care.

Keywords: Ecological education; Moral development; Ethics of Care; More-than-human; Empathy; Belonging