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Read about IEE:

A New Approach to Ecological Education
Engaging Students' Imaginations in Their World

Gillian Judson

imaginative ecological education
Does IEE require extra resources?

Well, it depends on how you define “resources”. Extra money, fancy technology or texts are not required. What is? IEE requires teachers willing to identify the source of emotional engagement in the topics they are teaching and to afford students opportunities to learn in the local natural and cultural contexts in which they live. Resources of time—to learn about and implement an IEE approach—as well as a supportive administration and parent body are also helpful.

Do you have more questions?

Learn more about IEE and/or contact us at www.ierg.net/iee

The Wonder of a Dandelion

From about three years of age Chloë has been fascinated with dandelions. To her, they are one of the world’s greatest wonders. From the explosive yellow petals of a dandelion in bloom through to the baldness of an empty seed head, she considers each one beautiful and captivating.

Chloë will often kneel amid the patches of dandelions in the local park. She carefully selects one. The whispery white seed head forms a perfect sphere. Within it exists a pattern of lines and texture she didn’t notice yesterday or the day before. Her eyes are wide in investigation as she looks closer. The softness of the seed head tickles her nose just moments before the long, slow breath that propels the tiny seed-parachutes into the air around her.

As the seeds encircle her, slowly making their way toward the grass, she wonders where each will land, what each will become, how there can be so few dandelions around her compared to the number of seeds released by each one. And why, why, she asks, are they so fluffy and white today when yesterday they were so shockingly yellow?
**In A Nutshell**

It is becoming clear that our survival as a species depends on re-imagining our relationship with nature. We need to cultivate **ecological understanding**—an awareness of our interconnectedness with nature based on knowledge about, and emotional connections with, the local, natural world. IEE offers teachers in any context—urban, suburban and rural—a way to do this while teaching the regular mandated curriculum. By designing pedagogy around the distinctive features of students’ imaginative lives, IEE can more routinely engage bodies, emotions and imaginations in the local natural and cultural contexts in which students live and learn.

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**Two Frequently Asked Questions**

**Is IEE an addition to the curriculum?**

No. IEE is not a new curriculum: it is an approach to teaching any curriculum—and any age of student—in a way that engages the body, emotion and imagination in the process. Any curriculum material—whether mathematics, social studies, or language arts for example—offers an opportunity to connect with place and to develop our body’s awareness in the world.

**What support is there for me if I want to try this approach in my teaching?**

The IEE website offers free support to teachers in the form of planning templates, brainstorming charts and elaborated examples. It also provides information on the basic premises and principles of IEE and offers links to additional publications that discuss IEE. The IEE team is also available to support more directed, on-site or on-line professional development. Teachers may also gain the support of other IEE teachers by joining our network and sharing their own resources.
PLACE

IEE aims to support students’ development of a sense of place—a sense of closeness with the natural world based on emotional connection and knowledge. Unlike current place-based initiatives, however, in IEE a sense of place is developed, in part, through the engagement of certain features of students’ imaginative lives that they tend to use to grasp their contexts. So, for example, IEE educators nurture the young child’s sense of relation to his or her place by affording opportunities in learning for the child to develop long-term emotional associations with features of the natural world. Employing “place-making” tools routinely in teaching regular features of the curriculum can result in students’ engagement with place developing as part of the learning process.

The Role of Imagination

Emotional and imaginative engagement is the glue that “bonds” us to the world: our emotions are one of the central ways in which we make meaning, orient ourselves to our world, make sense of our experiences. So, feeling about one’s world—in this case feeling part of a living world—requires emotion and imagination in learning about it.
The Rationale

Schools are increasingly being asked to deal with ecological issues and, more often than not, schools are stepping up to the challenge. Unfortunately, current approaches aimed at developing students’ ecological understanding—what will be referred to here as “ecological education”—are missing the mark. There are at least three major limitations to current practices in ecological education.

**Limitation #1: Ecological Education Is A Peripheral Educational Player**

In the mainstream schools ecological education has a marginal position in the curriculum; it is usually tied to particular units of study in particular subject-areas or is an add-on to an already extensive curriculum. There are limited resources available for teachers that actually centralize ecological understanding within the curriculum.

**Limitation #2: Problems Associated With Staying Inside**

In order to develop a sense of connection with the world around them and to break free from educational routines that can stifle the imagination, students need to get outside.

ACTIVENESS

The powerful learning tools afforded to us by our bodies are routinely engaged in an IEE learning experience. The term “Activeness” refers here to an immersive kind of engagement with the world. Activeness is not “being active” which is a more externally manifest relationship with nature and may have limited impact on how our bodies understand a topic at hand. Rather, in Activeness we seek to feel the world and understand it through the body—through our senses, yes, but importantly through our emotional responses, sense of musicality and humour.

How does the body participate in this topic? How can the body feel the importance of the topic?
3 Requirements For Imaginative And Ecological Learning

**FEELING**

Unless what students learn in school about the Earth is meaningful to them there is little chance they will care enough to save it. Because the aspects of the world that are meaningful to us evoke our emotions, it is crucially important that students are emotionally engaged in the learning process. This is probably the most distinctive aspect of IEE. The story form, mental imagery, humour and a sense of wonder are a few of the pedagogical tools teachers use to shape topics. These are learning tools that connect knowledge with emotion and imagination and, thus, make learning any curricular topic meaningful. (To learn more about these “cognitive” tools visit [www.ierg.net](http://www.ierg.net))

They also need to engage the body in meaningful ways in learning. IEE supports teachers in changing the learning context and engaging students with the diversity of life in the world around them in rural, suburban and urban contexts.

**Limitation #3: Ecological Education Marginalizes Emotion and Imagination**

In most ecological education programs emotional and imaginative engagement are considered educational frills rather than main workhorses of learning. When emotion and imagination are neglected there is little chance students will develop meaningful connections with the knowledge of the curriculum and the world of which they are part. Developing ecological understanding requires educators to activate students’ emotions and imaginations in learning.
How IEE Is Different

Like current approaches to ecological education, IEE focuses on the cultivation of students’ close, personal relationships with their local natural contexts. Unlike these approaches, however, IEE brings the emotional and imaginative engagement of the child to the center of theory and practice by shaping topics of the curriculum around those features of children’s imaginations that evoke wonder. The story-form, imagery, mystery, and change of context are just a few of the tools that leave students feeling something for what they are learning. IEE educators shape their teaching around these learning tools and, as a result, more routinely engage students’ emotions and imaginations with the world of which they are part.

Some Tools for Imaginative and Ecological Teaching

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