

THE LAST CHILD WITH A BIRD'S NEST: AN ECOLITERACY CURRERE

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"A bird's nest!" he exclaimed. He was eight, and the word "bird" sounded far more like "boird." He often spoke slowly and carefully, self-conscious of his speech that the other "after school kids" would imitate to mock him. But in his excitement, he had forgotten to be careful.

I looked across the field where they were standing. Their jackets flapped around them even though I advised them earlier to zip them up due to the wind. But I barely noticed because I was fixated on where they were standing. The two second-grade boys had jumped the wooden fence into an area beside one of the buildings, where they knew they were not allowed. Standing in the shade, they leaned over with their brown and red heads touching, a rare moment for these two who were typically in continuous movement. I spied their reason for jumping the fence, a partially-deflated, faded soccer ball (that I could not believe still functioned for its intended purpose) beside their feet. Apparently, they had forgotten it in favor of something more compelling.

I saw the shocks of red and brown hair lower close to the wet, dark mulch. My body tensed, prepared to give a command that would undoubtedly involve some form of negative reprimand. The word "no" and its connotations were so easy for me to utter, far easier than "yes." I had to keep them in line, after all (Schiro, 2013).

"He found a bird's nest!" the redhead called to me with a thrilled gasp. Wide-eyed with a grin across his face, he gestured wildly at what his companion gingerly held in his palms. Sets of blue and brown eyes looked at me imploringly as four grubby hands palmed the perfectly-shaped, empty treasure. There were some dried leaves stuck to it, and they delicately pulled them off. All ten little fingers touched it softly, exploring the indented hole and tiny twigs that formed it. They looked as if they were learning something (Cross, 2011), but I did not stop to ask what.

"PUT THAT *DOWN!*" I shrieked, stepping towards them quickly. *I bet it's filthy* was the first recognizable thought that entered my mind. Germs. Other children were already looking over curiously from where they played. Soon, their hands would be on it too if I did not intervene.

They need to wash their hands immediately! What if they tell their parents I let them play with it?! My anxiety rose with every step I made towards them. Why can't we just stay inside every day?! They would be so much easier to control! (Louv, 2008).

The boys moved to put it behind their backs, but it was futile. They had exposed their treasure, and now others were coming to take it away—people who were bigger, more powerful, and seemed to love telling them no. Wistfully, the redhead gently set it down. Before I got all the way to them, they took a final, longing look at the nest, then ran off to a group of their peers.

Many people would agree that I did the right thing. I was an after school program leader in charge of over twenty children who were constantly getting into things outside when the weather permitted. My eyes had to be on all of them, my ears attuned to every noise, my mind aware of potential dangers. The boys were in an area they should not have been in, handling something that could carry disease. My job was to keep order. But there was a time before teaching when I thought and felt so differently.

As a small child, I lived across from a little park with a creek. My mother would walk with me across the street and let me explore. I remember mud caked in the soles of my tiny shoes and rubbery grass perfect for sitting and losing my tiny cherished toys that I demanded to bring outside. Somehow, these details are far more vivid than anything I did indoors (Louv, 2008). I climbed the magnolia tree by my house so high that I could no longer see the top of my mom's blonde curly head. I don't remember her even telling me to come down. I do not remember learning math, but I remember how magnolia flowers feel to dissect. Once, there was a large stick balanced over the stream, and my mom held my hand as I tried to cross it, then pulled me back right before it broke.

On an especially eventful day, I dropped my favorite Cabbage Patch doll in the creek and watched its peach round head and green eyes bob in the water. I thought it would sink, but it didn't. Its soft body floated far quicker than expected away from me until my mom expertly fished it out with a stick by the hood of its blue coat. I still know that place in my mind, a type of literacy I found through touch and observation, creating a true "merger of landscape and mindscape" (Orr, 1992, p. 86).

I can still hear that stream when I think back on those moments, and I know that if I found a bird's nest when I was young, I could have palmed it with my tiny fingers, studied every side of it with exploratory eyes, and been met with a smile from my mom while I examined it as long as I wanted.

The absent bird that created the nest during my after school job made a memory that nested in my mind. The things that remain with us in education are often what we wish we had done differently, not our triumphs. The metaphorical bird, bright and cheerful, flies away, but the prickly twigs and dirt remain. Why didn't I let them explore? Why didn't I allow for embodied learning (Bowers, 2001)? Why did the scene of two little boys in my care holding something they found make my mind go to the binary of good vs. bad? Why didn't I embrace celebrating and exploring connections (Turner, 2015)? They were so young, so excited, so interested, and before I even looked at what they had found, I told them they needed to get rid of it. What if the bird's nest was the most interesting educational experience they'd had all day or even longer (Louv, 2008)? In some way, we all, as teachers, as organizations, as adults, are contributing to fewer children in the woods. What if that was the last time they ever held a bird's nest, and I caused it? This is not the educator I want to be. I want to "learn to see things differently" (Jucker, 2004, p. 22).

We were outside again the following week when I returned for my Wednesday afternoon supervision. Everything was orderly; everyone was playing in designated areas where I could see them. Scanning around, I saw a brown-haired boy sitting with his redheaded friend on a picnic bench. I should have been delighted that they were speaking at normal decibels, sitting in an approved area, and keeping their hands clean and their jackets zipped. But I also saw how bored they looked. Nothing seemed to be catching their vacant eyes with interest. They had just spent all day inside sitting in classrooms, and now that they had the chance to move around, they did not seem to care.

Slowly so that none of the students would see, I made my way over to the place in the fence where the boys jumped over the week before. My adult arms allowed me to retrieve last week's discarded treasure without climbing. Cradling the found object, I walked over to the boys.

"Look what I have," I said, holding it out to them. The nest was still mostly intact, with some blades of grass stuck to the sides now.

"The bird's nest!" The brown-haired boy said to his friend, with the word "bird" sounding like "boird" again. Both boys' smiles widened as I held it out to them.

“What do you think lived in this?” I asked as their eyes scanned the nest (McConnell et al., 2020).

“What kinds of birds live around here?” the redhead asked.

“Well, I don’t know, but I can look it up,” I offered.

“Can we touch it?” the brown-haired boy asked hesitantly.

“Sure,” I answered, “But you have to wash your hands after.” They nodded earnestly as their little fingers began to stroke the nest.

Though I was not their classroom teacher and only saw them once a week, my work with students always involves curriculum, and even small moments that focus on experience and exploration can help break down “the barriers between school and life” (McConnell et al., 2020, p. 66). This is the educator I hope to be.



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