The educational meaning of ‘wander’ in nature according to the development of early childhood

Yumiko Taoka

‘Wander’ in nature

‘It is important for children not to know about the nature but to play in nature’. When Helen Tovey gave a lecture on outdoor play, she used this phrase, which deeply impressed me (see Taoka, 2012, which points out the importance of ‘wander’). The nursery schools and kindergartens I visited in the UK recommended outdoor play in forest schools. Even if they did not have a large forest or a field nearby, they had small woodland areas and bushes within their grounds or they let children go to the nearby park. I think that these teachers did their best to provide an opportunity for children to enjoy playing outdoors. In big cities, as there are few easily accessible forests, children have to play in the school grounds or in a nearby park.

When I visited Cowgate nature kindergarten in Edinburgh (see Chapter 19), the forest school teacher said that the children under five play in the huge forest school. It comprises a field, a hill, a brook, several kinds of trees, shrubs, fallen leaves, flowers and a large tent.

In Japan, recently, it was reported that the number of children who have experienced activities in nature is decreasing. These include camping, watching the stars, climbing mountains, swimming in the river and sea, catching insects and watching birds singing (Cabinet Office, 2015). The Japanese Government emphasizes the importance of outdoor play as experiential activity. Many nursery and kindergarten teachers also stress the importance of outdoor play as well as some researchers. Forest school practices are not as popular as in the UK. At best, some of the nurseries and kindergartens are able to take care of plants and small animals once they have completed many other activities and tasks.

This chapter focuses on the times and places the children choose for themselves. I think that it is necessary for children to be provided with plenty of opportunities and spaces if they are to enjoy outdoor play sufficiently. In addition, it is important for them to choose to play using their own initiative. Children can find their own interesting things and places through
The educational meaning of ‘wander’

wandering outdoors from one thing to another. Tina Bruce (1991) identifies what she calls ‘free-flow play’. This view of play emphasizes the freedom which is essential in play, for children to choose, take control, explore, create, imagine and go beyond the here and now. It also emphasizes the importance of flow, the intense focused involvement experienced when the players are totally absorbed in the play and which can bring great satisfaction. The term ‘free flow’ also refers to the dynamic quality of play. ‘Free flow play’ values the child’s interest and choice about times and spaces. So in this chapter, I define ‘wander’ as walking in nature freely with sufficient opportunities.

Tracing back through education history, Rousseau (1762) is the person who first recommended outdoor play. In his book *Emile* he said that children should wander the fields and mountains around their hometown and have several kinds of experiences from their natural environment. Pestalozzi, who was an educationalist from Switzerland, was profoundly affected by Rousseau’s ideas. Pestalozzi recommended that children should walk around in nature and get to know it through feeling, touching, smelling, observing, and hearing. Froebel further expanded this, arguing that children need to wander in the fields. He believed that wandering is essential for the development of children. Children’s activities in nature are very vividly described in the book *Die Menschenerziehung* by Hoffman (1982) – see later.

What do children feel, realize and learn in nature? I will develop these ideas according to the development of early childhood based on Froebel’s educational thoughts and practice.

To stand on one’s own feet and first steps . . . independence from mother

There are some differences between human beings and other animals. For example: using fire, using language, using tools, handling symbols and becoming aware of one’s own mortality to name just a few. Human beings have the peculiarity of walking upright on two legs and need to stand up before walking.

Froebel (in Hoffman, 1982: 33) said, ‘Stehen ist eine, und zwar die vollkommenste Gesamtheit alles Glieder-und Körpergebrauchs: es ist das Finden des körperlichen Schwerpunktes’ – we need to strengthen the head, the limbs and the body and bring them together while maintaining balance in order to walk on two legs. When babies first stand up, they can feel the centre of their body and walk by standing on their legs on the ground. It means that babies who are dependent on their mother in daily life will be able to move at will. It is the starting point of combining every part of the body and realizing its existence as a whole.

In addition Froebel said, ‘Das körperliche Stehen ist für diese Stufe ebenso bedeutend, als das Lächeln, das leibliche (physische) sich-selbst-Finden, für die frühere Stufe war, und das sitzliche und religiöse Stehen für die letzte Stufe der Menschheitsentwicklung ist’ (ibid: 33). He grasped that a child first standing up shows not only the development of the limbs but also an emotional separation from the primary child carer. It is an early part of the development of self-consciousness. A child standing up initially means an independent human being on their own legs as well as mental independence.

When children can stand up, they take their first step immediately. Standing provides a wider perspective than sitting or crawling. Once a child can walk for the first time they repeat the enjoyment of walking again and again even if they fall over. Froebel explained that a child’s genuine enthusiasm for walking allows them to walk again. When children can walk, they can experience moving freely and reach to get something that they want. And when they can master a change of direction and turn round the corner of a desk or a chair, they can get to know their surroundings and explore the characteristics of several things around them.
Froebel pointed out that the child's first steps in the home are an exploring journey. The first steps allow understanding of several things surrounding the child. The child's carer has to let them connect with many things through standing, walking around and teaching the name of things and their attributes. For example, an apple, an orange, up and down, right and left, chair and desk, hot and cold, soft and hard and so on. The first steps are a physical activity, bringing together each part of the body as a whole. It is also a construction of the child's own vision of their surroundings.

Walking around the child's neighbourhood . . . discovering the natural world

As the child grows up, walking in the home extends to the outdoors. When they walk outdoors and in nature, they are fascinated by natural phenomena: plants and insects, birds and fish, pebbles and sand, a piece of wood, frost and ice, crystallization of snow and so on. And a child has the opportunities to observe, collect, classify, put things in order, raise animals and cultivate plants. In Froebel's books 'Die Menschenerziehung' and 'Mutter und Kose-lieder' [Mother Songs], there are some descriptions of children meeting and being excited by some plants and small animals. For example, they find a bird's nest and baby birds, fish sailing freely in a river and they look at the stars and the moon in the sky. They are attracted by many natural things and want to look carefully and touch them. They want to know what these things are.

It is well known that when children notice something new (beautiful flowers, small insects, sticks and even rubbish!) on a stroll in nature, they stop walking and crouch down to take a good look. Froebel said that it is a new discovery for a child to find something in nature, however tiny it is. As they grow up, walking focuses on the outdoors, and has many opportunities to encounter a great variety of natural wildlife. Thus, the world expands in the eyes of the child. Every time something new in nature is found, they reconstruct their own mental image of the world. They learn about the natural world through walking in nature. The parents and practitioners have to give children time and space to discover nature and let them choose where they go. Froebel emphasized that it is important for the parents and practitioners to say to the children that everything they find outdoors is connected with the origin of life from God.

Walking in an image . . . play creating a story

When we visited Cowgate and walked around the field and forest, the teacher told us that the children likened an old fallen tree to a dragon, making up a story about it and enjoying role play with friends.

I watched the same thing happen in the forest section of the Froebelian School, Annan School in Sussex (see Chapter 33). When I visited, it was pouring with rain and very windy. But the teachers and the children went out into the neighbouring forest wearing rain jackets and Wellington boots. Though I worried how the children would enjoy playing in these conditions, they actually enjoyed their own favourite spots and playing in the forest. Some children were gathering the water flowing by a big tree and lapping it up. Some of the boys were enjoying role play as sailors in the storm with an old low branch resembling a rudder. The other children enjoyed making hedgehogs with a nut, a shell and clay that the teacher had prepared as materials. After making hedgehogs, a few children enjoyed making a story with hedgehogs in the rain. Moreover, after coming back to their classroom, the teacher prepared pictures of hedgehogs.
A child can find several things by chance wandering through nature and can create a story with the old wild branches, a stump, fallen leaves and so on. They often enjoy symbolic play with the natural things they find.

Froebel also introduced group play which likens wandering to a tour and a visit he called a ‘Touring play’ or ‘Visiting play’. The children enjoy singing and dancing and making a story with each other, based on the experiences in the outdoors such as a bird’s singing, some lovely flowers, a flock of sheep, a honeybee, a brook, a drifting cloud. These plays develop their imagination and creativity because the children make up their stories based on the scene and the happenings of their daily experiences. Additionally, the children can collaborate and invent the story together with playmates through sharing each other’s imagination. Of course in order for children to enjoy role play sufficiently, it is necessary to have a lot of time and space for wandering freely according to their interests in nature.

**Explore in the fields and hills . . . construct in collaboration with playmates**

Froebel said that children in early childhood can take part in play of their own free will (see Chapter 5). They tend to be attracted by the unknown world of darker, deeper and higher places, liking adventures and explorations such as entering potholes, rolling down hills, climbing high up trees and mountains and wandering fields and forests, covering a wide area. Although there are some risks and dangers of falling down and getting injured in adventures and explorations in nature, it does not usually deter them.

Froebel evaluated the joy, freedom, and intentions of the children. When a child climbs a tree, they can feel their physical strength developing. At the same time a child can gain a wide view and discover a new world. The experiences bring to a child a spiritual elevation. A child may cry out for joy through getting to know the new and wide view. A child is able to develop a spirit of grit and determination faced with a hard task and can overcome it through adventure and exploration. Furthermore, they gain a strong will, perseverance and confidence in their own ability when overcoming a difficult task. Froebel sees the child as competent rather than incompetent. Helen Tovey also emphasized the importance of trusting children, stating ‘freedom in play involved the opportunity to do things, not protection from things. It involved trusting children. Trusting children requires knowledge of capabilities, their confidence and a willingness to relinquish some control’ (Tovey, 2007: 109).

In addition, Froebel pointed out that the young children are fond of making their own gardens and a secret playing space, such as a den with bushes. Its space is their own place, to which the children can retreat and feel relaxed, comfortable and joyful. Froebel recommended that it is necessary for the children to experience small insects and birds, having their own space like a den and building a miniature village with small buildings. This play means that the children construct and enjoy the world using their own mind.

When children build something in nature with stones, leaves, boards, sand and clay, they need to cooperate with each other for the same purpose. Froebel valued the importance of a relationship together in cooperation as a team. He described the scene vividly in ‘Die Menschenerziehung’. For example, every child digs a hole in the ground and constructs a garden, a den and a fort, and soon they look at each other’s work as a whole and talk to each other. Finally, they will complete a joint task as a whole. They can feel immense pleasure and mutual trust through their cooperation. And they will realize the responsibility of their own work as a member of the whole group. It is important for the children to be brought up to foster an awareness of membership in a community.
School excursion through hiking . . . feeling unity in a geography lesson

When a young child goes to primary school, ‘wander’ in nature may be moved to a school excursion in geography. Froebel said that it is important for pupils to be close to nature, the community members and the products of the district, which young boys and girls have lived with since they were born. Knowing their neighbourhood well is the foundation for a child living a full life as a citizen in the future. So it is crucial for pupils to learn geography that explains the lie of the land, nature and life in their area. He recommended ‘purposeful wandering’, led by the teacher of a primary school. Learning geography is based on the experiences of wandering in nature. For example, the adventures of young boys and girls exploring a tree where insects live, a brook where fish sail past, the place where the flowers are in bloom, the place where young deer live, a hill suitable for climbing or a dusky cave. The children can get to know the relationship with the local topography and the local residents well through walking to a lot of places with the teacher and friends in a geography lesson.

When children see their neighbourhood from the top of a mountain, they realize the connection of each place that they were familiar with as a whole. They enjoy feeling a member of the whole while walking in nature. Froebel said that the most important point is not observing each mountain and each hill one by one but understanding a connection and a chain of them as a whole. He believed that the children can feel a divine unity and connectedness that all living creatures and things have when standing on the hills and mountains which overlook the scene spread out before their eyes. For Froebel, however, the natural phenomena spreading out below shows the individuality and the diversity, and it is the ultimate purpose of geography for children to feel the unity of life as a whole.

For Froebel, wandering in nature is not merely about moving from one place to another. Standing on one’s own feet and first steps for a baby means growing independence from the mother. When babies stand up, they have to harmonize each part of their body and can feel the unity in themselves as a whole. Through wandering in nature in their early years, children get to know natural things and phenomena as a new world and they construct their world in their inner life. Young boys and girls are fond of playing with risk and danger. Through adventure and exploration, they develop a strong will, a spirit of perseverance and confidence in their own ability. In addition, they experience collaboration through connecting their own piece of work to a whole collection all the while in cooperation with others. In any case, it is necessary for children to have much time to wander and flow freely in nature. Wandering in nature, which is part of ‘free flow play’, becomes an excursion, with ‘purposeful wandering’ led by a teacher of the primary school. When the children look down on their hometown from the top of a mountain or hill, they can realize the connections – as parts of whole – of each place with which they were familiar in their early years. School excursion through hiking provides an opportunity for children to feel the unity of all things in this world.

A project

As a Lecturer in Ryukoku University the project that follows was with students who wanted to be a nursery school or kindergarten teacher. It was designed to help them learn the importance of ‘Wander’ in nature according to the development of early childhood. Ninety-two second grade students attended my lecture, ‘The principles of education’ on 14th April 2016. I examined the students’ responses to the subject through the following first questionnaire, given at the end of the lecture. In addition, I gave homework which required them to ‘wander’ in their
neighbourhood and to complete a second questionnaire in which I asked them to write their impressions of short strolls in nature and whether they realized the importance of children’s ‘wander in nature’.

The first questionnaire

Q1. Did you understand today’s lecture whose focus is the educational meaning of ‘wander’ in nature according to the development of early childhood?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. Did any aspects of today’s lecture resonate with your own experiences of early years’ learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3. What kind of play do you remember in nature?

Students remembered:
- First step keeping one’s balance while lifting both hands up
- Enjoy smelling a fragrant orange-coloured olive
- Sand play
- Taking a bath by fallen leaves
- Playing in a puddle
- Digging a deep hole
- Catching insects
- Observing a queue of ants and disturbing it
- Making a crown and a ring with flowers
- Interest in ice
- Stepping on ice needles
Symbolic play when observing clouds  
Secret place  
Climbing a tree  
Role-play using sticks  
Jumping over a wall and entering a narrow alley  
Exploring by bicycle  
I could realize the educational meaning of daily play in early years  
Cannot remember (3 people)

Q4. Do you think that it is important for children to wander freely in nature?

Table 16.3 Questionnaire 1, Responses to question 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree or disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students’ responses to the second questionnaire are detailed below.

The second questionnaire

Q1. Did you enjoy ‘Wander’ around your home?

Table 16.4 Questionnaire 2, Responses to question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. What did you find through your ‘Wander’ around your home?

The students reported finding:
- Some plants and animals
- Fallen cherry blossoms
- The moon and stars in the evening
- The singing of an insect
- The singing of a bird
- Sounds of a river
- Smelling of food
The educational meaning of ‘wander’

Feeling of wind  
Building  
Trash  
Hoarding  
Babies in a pram  
Clouds in several shapes  
Enjoying springlike weather  
Feeling uneven ground  
Communicating with neighbours

Q3. If you become a teacher of kindergarten or day nursery, will you try to have a time to ‘Wander’ in nature for the children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

Most of the students understood the value of ‘wandering in nature’ in early childhood through my lecture based on Froebel’s thought and practice. Most of the students had also had experiences of enjoying play with natural things and natural phenomena when they were young. However, few students could recognize the educational meaning of ‘wandering’ in nature in their own early childhood. It was necessary for students to have more time to discuss with each other the educational meaning of play involving wandering in nature. The students who didn’t remember their play in early childhood tended to disagree with the content of my lecture. In their homework, some students tried to see things in nature from the viewpoint of children as they walked. A few found that they didn’t know the names of plants and animals and had to learn them as a teacher after they walked.

I explained my project and showed the two questionnaires to my colleague who has been a head teacher of a public kindergarten in Osaka for 25 years. She told me that it is necessary for us to pick up ‘wandering in nature’ not only in a lecture on ‘The principles of education’ but also in a lecture on the ‘Environment’. In Japan, this consists of five areas: health, human relationships, environment, language and expression. Nowadays a great number of students who want to be a kindergarten or day nursery teacher have few natural experiences and they don’t know the names of plants and animals. So it is necessary for students to have the opportunities to research plants and animals and to experience the natural world.

However, Osaka is a big city and has few parks, forests and fields. The public kindergarten teachers in Osaka try to cultivate some plants and vegetables (strawberry, tomato and sweet potato) and have some small animals in their kindergartens. In addition, they go out to a park or a field with children once a month to give an outdoor experience to the children.