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LEARNING TO CARE THROUGH NATURE- BASED EMOTIONAL EDUCATION

A case study in a Spanish alternative school

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ABSTRACT

Linda Linnaranta: Learning to care through nature-based emotional education – A case study in a Spanish alternative school
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This study focused on exploring the pedagogical practices that encourage the development of caring behaviour towards the self, others, and the environment. Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to explore the ways in which nature-based emotional education and more caring practices could be implemented in the Finnish primary school pedagogies.

This qualitative study was a case study. To obtain a different perspective, the data was collected in Spain at a small rural school with an alternative pedagogy focusing on nature-based emotional education. The data consisted of field observations over the course of four entire school days during a period of two months, and teacher reflection from interviews with one of the teachers. The data was analysed using phenomenographic content analysis and discussed in light of an analytical framework and academic literature.

The study shows that caring for the self, others, and the environment can be integrated into a pedagogic approach that emphasises social emotional skills and nature-connectedness. According to the case study, aspects of care can be a part of the daily structures of the school, and the competences and atmospheres it strives to develop. Furthermore, the pedagogical forest environment gave unique opportunities to practice all aspects of care. Further research is needed to clarify the societal impacts of such approach. More teacher training is called for especially related to emotional education and how to integrate it with environmental education through a lens of caring.

Keywords: emotional education, environmental education, nature connectedness, caring

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Nature-based emotional education as a response to the needs the society poses on education

The world is at a pivotal moment where the vulnerability of the environment, society, and people seems to have become increasingly visible. Resilience to changes and threats is called for in many areas of life. Stressful lifestyle and increasing demands have had their toll on physical and mental health, leading to social issues. Education flows in the same pace with the society around it. In Finnish media, phenomena like school bullying have arisen serious discussions about the mental and physical well-being of students and the role of teachers and headmasters in regard to the social-emotional well-being of the whole school. The national broadcasting company (YLE) recently reported that a sixth grader was severely abused by their peer (Hirvonen 2020), which raised questions and urges for action among politicians (Jämsén 2020). At the same time, emotional wellbeing and emotional competences of students has started to interest teachers and teacher students, which has led to conclusions that more emotional education is needed to revitalize school communities, improve the wellbeing of their members, and prevent bullying (eg. Penttilä 2018).

Another parallel discussion in media is the environment and the global climate crisis we are facing, but also the benefits of nature on our well-being and learning outcomes when harnessed in educational settings, as introduced by YLE for instance (Kataja 2020). Climate change, biodiversity loss and sustainable development have become more and more present in school projects and curriculum content. However, teachers' tools to address climate change, and the emotions that arise in relation to it, in age-appropriate ways remain insufficient, especially when it comes to young learners.

The underlying idea of my thesis lies in the understanding that both the nature and emotions have intertwining roles in our lives. Being in nature may improve

health and learning outcomes in many areas of development, but it is also the object of cognitive learning. Similarly, emotional wellbeing and emotional intelligence make learning easier, while emotions can also be the object of our exploration and interest (Milton 2002, 149). These functions are linked to each other in the following way: being in nature can help regulate emotions and offers a playground for practicing new physical skills and social interaction with other people. At the same time, our emotions play an important role in how we engage with nature now and in the future. And lastly, the idea that we protect what we love and care for, brings these reflections to a wider societal arena of climate change, biodiversity, and societal wellbeing. Acting for what we care broadens the possibilities for education to contribute to the work that needs to be done to bring more harmony to the relations between ourselves, other people, and the non-human world.

In this qualitative study, I explore how emotional education and nature-based pedagogies can be combined in nature-based emotional education. By arguing that caring is part of the fundamentals of both emotional and environmental education, I study the ways in which the three aspects of care – for the self, others, and nature – are present in nature-based emotional education. I set out to ask, what impact a caring pedagogy could have on individual, communal, and societal levels. The study is motivated by the aim of including more care perspectives in Finnish primary school pedagogies. I study caring pedagogical practices in a selected school in Spain that provides a fruitful case study context; the school shares similar basic values as the Finnish education system yet emphasizes nature-based learning and socio-emotional competences. By introducing the ideas from the case study to the Finnish context I seek to raise new insight on how to develop the nexus between emotional and environmental education. I explore these questions through a phenomenographic content analysis, based on an empirical study in a small Spanish alternative school that emphasizes democratic education and connection to nature with children between three and eleven years of age. To describe the outdoor learning environment used for pedagogical purposes, I use the term *pedagogical forest environment*. The study makes use of the *Social-Emotional and Environmental Education Development (SEED)* framework, first introduced by Deborah Carter (2016), and the three aspects of care by Nel Noddings (2013), as well as relevant

academic literature related to social-emotional skills, nature connectedness, and environmental education. Finally, I discuss the key findings in light of this literature and demonstrate why emotional education and environmental education ought to be seen as an inseparable combination that has a potential to impact individuals, communities, and the society at large.

1.2 Research problem

The purpose of this study is to explore how emotional education and learning in nature can be combined in the field of education. The SEED framework is aligned with my idea of a holistic approach that builds a connection between emotions and nature. At the centre of the framework is the three-dimensional continuum of social-emotional education, environmental literacy, and child development. I understand these three aspects as the outer layers or appearances of Noddings' three aspects of care: care for the self, care for others, and care for the environment. To create a clear link between humans and the natural world around us, I use the concept of 'nature connectedness'. As these aspects are the fundamentals of the kind of education I am focusing on in this study, I will use them as analytical starting points. I have formed the following research problem to explore the practice of alternative pedagogy in a selected case. The analysis includes a reflective layer from the teacher perspective on the impact of the used pedagogical approach.

How are the aspects of care (for oneself, the others and the environment) present in the practices of nature-based emotional education?

1. Which daily structures are pivotal to the accomplishment of three-dimensional care in nature-based emotional education?
2. What kinds of competences and atmospheres does nature-based caring pedagogy address to encourage caring?
3. What does the pedagogical forest environment provide for the development of social-emotional skills and caring relations?
4. Where does the potential of nature-based caring pedagogy lie, and how could its impact reach the society?

2 NATURE-BASED EMOTIONAL EDUCATION AND CARING PEDAGOGY

School and the field of education are closely connected with societal phenomena and change. Improving the social-emotional skills of students and contributing to healthier attitudes towards nature have gained interest among Finnish educators. In what follows I present two current pedagogical tendencies and justify why they ought to gain the attention of teachers, communities, and policymakers: First, emotional well-being of young learners, which includes conversations on the current social-emotional problems in primary schools and pedagogical approaches that have been proven efficient in solving them; Second, environmental education – how learning outdoors has become more popular and, more importantly, why it matters from the perspective of the holistic well-being of students, communities, and the future of humanity facing an eco-crisis that threatens the planet's biodiversity. I also discuss the similarities these approaches share and how they complement each other. In Chapter 2.2, I suggest caring as a common surface between these two approaches of education and shed light on the broad, but perhaps not so commonly addressed, theme of care in education.

2.1 Emotional education as a current pedagogical trend

2.1.1 Emotional skills as tools for wellbeing and learning

In this work, I use the concept of social-emotional skills as a parallel concept with socio-emotional competences. Hintikka (2016) uses the concept of socio-emotional competences which covers the concepts of emotional and self-regulatory skills as well as socio-cognitive and social skills. Peltonen and

Kullberg-Piilola (2005, 12–17) define emotional and self-regulatory skills as competences that, together with one's social behaviour, define one's daily actions, decisions, thoughts, and dreams. Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 148) add that knowing how to recognise, acknowledge and live in a balance with one's emotions, as well as the ability to understand and solve difficult emotions, are an important part of emotional skills. They also stress the importance of noticing, cherishing, and strengthening positive emotions, the ability to understand the emotions of others, and being able to empathise with the emotions of others. Having these emotional skills can prevent many mental disorders and increase the overall wellbeing and learning of children until adulthood (ibid.). Emotional education aims to guide students to learn the necessary emotional, self-regulatory and social skills they need.

Emotions are an important tool in learning, not only for our relations with others, but also because the way we *feel* during a learning experience has an important influence on what we then *remember* about it, which in turn may affect our future thoughts and actions (Milton 2002, 149). Similarly, negative feelings of anger or frustration can hinder one's learning if students are not equipped with adequate emotional regulation strategies (Wortha et al. 2019). When emotions are suppressed or disregarded, problems arise – in physical, emotional, and social well-being, as much as in learning and in the atmosphere of a community. According to Junttila (2010), 15 to 20 percent of Finnish school-aged children experience loneliness, fears, anxiety, bullying or depression. Hiding these experiences and emotions can be heavy, and unhealthy patterns that neglect or ridicule children's emotions are harmful and can lead to serious issues (eg. Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 158).

Bullying, an increasingly common and severe phenomenon in schools, is one of the symptoms that can be caused by a lack of emotional skills. Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) indeed argue that some of the differences in empathy and bullying patterns, for instance, may be consequential to variations in children's emotionality and the way they regulate their emotions. Knowler and Frederickson (2013) found that when children with low levels of emotional literacy were taught emotional literacy for 12 weeks, their peer-rated bullying behaviour decreased. Touch is also an important emotional regulator for children, and the lack of it can lead to aggressive behaviour, as suggested by Field (2002).

2.1.2 Emotional education in schools

How can teachers then encourage and guide children to navigate their emotions so as to prevent socially consequential personal problems? Teaching emotional skills starts with understanding that “emotions are our friends” and they must not be damped because they send us messages, which is why it is good to start by learning to recognise and name emotions – and letting all emotions arise (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 171). Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 172) give three concrete starting points for teachers who want to help their students learn emotional skills:

- 1) Safety: Emotional education must be guided by a trustworthy, stable adult, and the group atmosphere must enable a confidential sharing of one’s inner world;
- 2) Strengthening the good: Encouraging and empowering children and seeing the good in them;
- 3) Compassion: Interacting with loving kindness and empathy.

Studies show that the safer and more encouraged one feels, the more likely it is that one can learn new things and is better able to regulate and express emotions (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 172). The feeling of safety depends on the emotional atmosphere in the classroom, which, according to Avola and Pentikäinen (ibid.), means that every individual is treated with respect, they can trust the people around them, and feel safe to show every side of themselves while still feeling a sense of belonging. This kind of emotionally safe atmosphere obviously requires conscious action and strong social-emotional skills from the teacher.

Studies also indicate an emotionally safe atmosphere as a contributor to a sense of belonging, thus to social-emotional well-being of students and their learning outcomes (eg. Kyrö-Ämmälä & Arminen 2020). An increased sense of belonging can be influenced by respectful and warm relations with adults, equality and respect between adults, and a school-atmosphere that creates a feeling of being respected, welcomed, and supported (Takala et. al 2020). Similarly, Lakkala, Uusiautti and Määttä (2016) suggest that this sense of belonging can be improved through creating a dialogic culture in the relations among students and teachers. It has also been shown that a warm relationship between students and

teachers, and the teacher's emotional support to student, can increase student motivation, commitment to schoolwork and emotional wellbeing (Takala ym. 2020; Kyrö-Ämmälä & Arminen 2020).

Since my aim is to develop the Finnish education, looking at its core values and guidelines – the national core curriculum – is important. The power of emotions has been acknowledged by Finnish educators and policymakers, which is reflected in the recently reformed Finnish national core curriculum for basic education, effective since 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). In the core curriculum, the conception of learning is based on seeing the pupils as active agents, and it acknowledges the importance of emotions, appraisal, self-esteem and self-image in learning, motivation and the goals pupils set for their learning. Additionally, in the afore-mentioned curriculum, capacities to communicate with others and express oneself are seen as one of the aims of transversal competences that ought to be addressed throughout basic education. In the national core curriculum for basic education (FNBE 2016), emotional skills are a part of the content of environmental education.

In addition to the aims set for pupils, the Finnish Ministry of education and culture has set up the Teacher education forum to develop the Finnish teacher education in universities. In a development program published in 2016, emotional skills, communication skills and collaboration skills are a part of teachers' transversal basic competences (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, 21–22).

Despite these requirements, the current teacher training does not provide teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach the social-emotional skills called for in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Kirvesoja 2013, Virtanen 2013). Before they can successfully teach those skills to children and support them as they practice their social-emotional skills in play and conflicts with their peers, teachers and other educators need to be able to cope with their own emotions and work on their emotional balance (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 85). For me, it was interesting to hear how the teacher in this study is managing this balance of self-work, working with colleagues, and supporting the self-growth of their students (see Chapter 4.2). This gives a new perspective that can be obtained by observing a different educational setting where the educational solutions are based on similar values as those of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education.

To fill the gap between recognising the need of and acting for emotional education, teachers have started to educate themselves further after graduating. Trainings and courses focusing on positive pedagogy and wellness- and compassion skills have gained interest among educators. Pages and groups related to a more respectful way of educating, mindfulness in schools, positive pedagogy, and alternative pedagogies like Montessori and Waldorf have gained a following ranging from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands of people.

Finally, I join Higgings (2011) in reminding educators that emotional education, or “educating the child’s emotional self” as she articulates, requires a lot of understanding towards the child and an openness to adapt to their needs and situations. Higgings concludes that what children are going through with their emotions, identities, in their home life, and with their family plays an important role in the way they are prepared to share these personal experiences. Understanding the possibilities and risks of emotional education in schools is essential – Higgings (2011, 452) argues that “in order for emotional education to be an ethical and educational endeavour, educators must be mindful and respectful of children’s individual processes and their own particular ways of participating in emotional education projects.”

2.2 Increasing interest towards nature’s potential in educational settings

Emotional well-being is not only impacted by our own thoughts and other people with whom we share our daily struggles. Our spaces, whether man-made or natural, impact our well-being too – positively and negatively. Knowing the benefits of learning outdoors, increasingly many educators in kindergartens and schools have started to take their students outdoors to learn the same things they would practice indoors so as to contribute to the wellbeing of the students. In what follows, I discuss the possibilities of nature-based education and its possible impact.

2.2.1 Taking learning outdoors

Living during an environmental crisis also sets some expectations on education since it is the place where attitudes and values are largely created. The national

core curriculum for basic education of the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE 2016) emphasizes humans as an inseparable and dependent part of nature, and striving for sustainability is recognized as one of its core values. The curriculum calls for ecosocial knowledge and abilities that include understanding the severity of climate change, going towards circular economy where natural resources are used sustainably, and most importantly promoting “a culture that fosters the inviolability of human dignity and the diversity and ability for renewal of ecosystems” (FNBE 2016, Chapter 2.2). Building a sustainable future is also one of the aims of transversal competences in the national core curriculum.

Nature is a broad term and is often confused or intertwined with the environment. In this study, I consider nature as an intertwinement of ecosystems which is only one of the ways to understand nature (Elliot 2010). Following Willamo (2004), I find it important to understand humans as part of nature and dependent on it. Defining environment, I join Parikka-Nihti and Suomela (2014): environment is personal, social, scientific, and societal. They add that the personal environmental aspect is important because it consists of the understanding derived from our environmental experiences and social environments. In this study, I use the term environment to refer to natural and human-built environments. When referring to climate change and the global ecological crisis, I use ‘the environment’ (ibid.), and ‘one’s environment’ for more local or social environment, depending on the context.

In this study, I am interested in nature as a part of the school days and pedagogy, and an explicit part of it is looking at nature as a learning environment. My main focus is on forests, urban forests or forest-like outdoor play areas that are part of children’s daily activities in the participatory school. What I will call *pedagogical forest environments* can be shaped by humans, but still have plants, trees, rocks, and other natural objects in a central role as opposed to human-built constructions made of concrete, plastic, and steel for instance. Pedagogical forest environments do not need to look like a typical forest in the Spanish mountains or surrounding a Finnish lake. However, the term ‘pedagogical forest environment’ captures the idea that the outdoor environment has natural objects as a centre piece, and that the environment lives in the same flow with the people who use it for their pedagogical needs. It grows, changes and is taken care of – allowing students to learn how to care for it, but it also works as a display of

natural phenomena and nature's cycles, just like a wild forest. Having natural objects in pedagogical forest environments is essential because, unless a child experiences contact with a natural environment, it might be hard to understand the way humans depend on the environment (Parikka-Nihti & Suomela 2017, 10). I am interested in seeing specific ways of using the pedagogical forest environment and the materials found there, by teachers and children alike – how things found outdoors, such as leaves, sticks, pinecones, and tree trunks, but also the fields of grass, slopes and nooks creating the environment, are used in the school selected for the case study, and what else does that environment possibly offer them.

Learning in nature, or more precisely in forests, promotes diverse benefits in learners. These benefits can be related to skills, such as motor, balance, and coordination skills (Fjørtoft 2004). Jumping, running, and walking in a pedagogical forest environment is different than moving in a square of concrete, and offers more stimuli and challenges to the bodies and brains of children. Coordinating the movements of one's walking legs, hands that bring balance, and eyes looking for the next step, gives a good workout for the whole body-mind.

Nature can impact the health of children directly and indirectly, which has recently gained media attention in Finland. The national broadcasting company YLE (Kataja 2020) got interested in the findings of Roslund and others (2020), where the results of a biodiversity intervention were seen in the microbiome on the skin, blood, and gut of daycare children one month after bringing forest soil and plants into the yards of urban daycare centers. Children between 3 and 5 years old were playing in the soil and with the plants, which caused these changes that directly impacted their immunoregulatory pathways, and can later decrease the risk of allergies, atopy, celiac and diabetes (Roslund et al. 2020). This is of course different from a rural school, like the one in this study, yet it indicates that if nature brought to the yard of a kindergarten can have such an impact on the children, the impact of an ever-present natural environment must be similar if not stronger. Various longitudinal studies with school children have also shown a correlation of time spent outdoors and the prevention of myopia, an increasingly prevalent eye condition (e.g., Guggenheim et al. 2012; French et al. 2013, Lingham et al. 2021). Jin and others (2015) gave students two more 20-

minute outdoor recesses daily, which decreased the incidence of myopia by 50 percent in one year.

In addition to physical and health-related benefits, learning in nature promotes language development and socio-emotional skills (Carter 2016). Hanscom (2016) explains that the changing conditions offer stimuli for language development as the child learns to name new things and communicates through different situations (Hanscom 2016). The restoring effect of nature on children's attention is proven to help them in attention requiring tasks (see eg. Schutte, Torquati & Beattie 2017). Amoly and others (2014) conclude that green and blue spaces benefit the behavioural development of schoolchildren, which is aligned with Taylor and Kuo's (2011) findings that show a reduction in the severity of symptoms of ADHD in children whose daily play settings are outdoors and for hyperactive children the more open the space the more their symptoms changed.

2.2.2 Nature connectedness

When practicing nature-based emotional education, it is important to be aware of the significance and mechanisms of our connection to nature. Heinonen and Kuisma (1994, 16–17) argue that one's personal values and attitudes toward and relating with nature form one's nature relationship. I consider this important, however Parikka-Nihti and Suomela (2016, Chapter 5, Figure 5) add that one's relationship with the environment needs communication between the child's physical environments (opportunities of action, and guided and free action), social environments (support, interest, fears, obstacles), individual aspects (personality, age, imagination, fears), and the child's individual interests, motor skills and curiosity. This definition includes the idea that one's relationship with nature or environment at large depends on their physical environments as much as their social environments and individual qualities and action.

The connection with nature can also be seen as an expansion of one's sense of self, and a feeling of belonging to the expansive natural community, which is needed so as to promote protective behaviour towards the environment, as defined by ecopsychologists (e.g., Roszak 1995, Roszak et al. 1995). Seymour (2016) looks at the human-nature relationship through an interdisciplinary lens, arguing that the individual relationship with nature goes

beyond believing or feeling oneself as part of the nature. Rather, the relationship impacts both humans and nature, and is constantly evolving individually and at a societal level:

It can also be understood as, and inclusive of, our adaptive synergy with nature as well as our longstanding actions and experiences that connect us to nature. Over time, as research and scientific knowledge progresses, it is anticipated that this definition of the human–nature relationship will adapt, featuring the addition of other emerging research fields and avenues. (Seymour 2016, 4)

Nature relationship plays an important role in the ways a person perceives nature and possibly acts for the planet's biodiversity (e.g., Milton 2002). Feeling connected to nature is beneficial to many aspects of wellbeing and can support pro-environmental behaviour (Lumber et al. 2017; Mayer & Frantz 2004). These attitudes are formed during childhood and can be influential throughout the life course until adulthood – Nowitsky-Wahlroos (2019) found out that nature-relationship established in childhood and developed through adulthood had an impact on some of the life choices of her interviewees, for example on where to live or what kind of military service to choose. Palmer (1998) also reported that out of 232 environmental educators, 79 (42 percent) mentioned being outdoors as a child and 114 educators (49 percent) mentioned direct experiences with nature as influencers in choosing their education or becoming interested in environmental concerns. It is therefore of great importance to consider what nature and the possibilities of connectedness with it may offer to the field of education and the future of humanity.

Studies have discovered various ways of strengthening the nature relationship of children. Lumber and others (2017) found out that in order to promote nature connection and its benefits in education, teachers should focus on practices that focus on contact, meaning, emotional attachment or compassionate relation to nature, which also means engaging with nature's beauty. Brymer, Cuddihy and Sharma-Brymer (2010) underline that feelings of connection to nature are related to spiritual wellness, a central aspect of wellbeing that impacts the physical, emotional, and other dimensions of wellness. Through this link between nature connections, spiritual wellness, and holistic wellness, they conclude that when given opportunities for feelings of connection with nature, one may experience optimal wellbeing. One could draw a conclusion that

the more we appreciate the beauty of nature and our connection to non-human things, instead of nature's material resources as serving the economy, the stronger our emotional and spiritual attachment to nature becomes, which in turn may strengthen one's nature relationship and influence environmental attitudes and agency. However, these are individual and complex processes that might not always follow this kind of causalities.

To strengthen the nature relationship of children, it is essential that adults engaged in nature-based emotional education have a strong and respectful relationship between themselves and nature. The nature relationship of the educator also affects the way they see nature as a resource for teaching (Parikka-Nihti & Suomela 2017, 10), and the emotions educators have towards the environment may impact those of the students too (Pihkala 2020). Modelling respectful and nurturing connections to nature is important for the children to follow the example of adults in everything, including environmentally responsible behaviours (ibid., 7). The social and cultural environment of a child also influences their habits related to nature and their environments (Olli et al. 2013), which can be seen as a foundation of Heinonen and Kuisma's (1994, 16–17) description for nature relationship. Parikka-Nihti and Suomela's definition of environment relationship also underlines one's social environment.

The effects of a strong nature relationship can reach far in the life of a child. If the relationship is sturdy and respectful, it helps one to consider nature as a valuable part of oneself, which promotes a sustainable lifestyle later in life (Novitsky-Wahlroos 2019, 59). Studies show a relationship between nature connectedness, wellbeing, and pro-environmental attitudes (Lumber et al. 2017). Moreover, Milton (2002, 151) is convinced that if we learn to understand who we are as human beings and as humanity – including our human qualities, strengths and weaknesses, and the emotional basis of our actions – we are better equipped to lessen the threat we have caused for the planet. I believe she means that with this knowledge, it is easier to know better where to look for possible solutions or threats. Milton (ibid.) makes a strong argument about the connection of knowing oneself and pro-environmental action, and although I consider her conclusion rather straight-forward, I believe the possibility of the connection is worth acknowledging considering that nature relationship and nature connectedness

depend on our emotions and have been proven to promote pro-environmental behaviour as mentioned earlier.

This brings the attention back to emotional education. Based on Milton's idea (2002, 151), and what Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 85) emphasize about the importance of teachers' inner work, I conclude that if teachers are in tune with their emotions and bodily sensations, they can recognize the connection between themselves and nature too, and thus help their students to reach towards the same path. One could also ask whether recognizing the connection between themselves and nature may be easier for teachers who are in tune with their emotions, and whether this ability to *feel* connected to nature could help them guide their students towards the same path. Based on Milton's ideas (ibid.), one answer could be: the better we know ourselves and are able to cultivate compassion and empathy, the more we can recognize and verbalize our nature experiences, as well as relate and connect to the natural world. Considering the increasing worry about the climate (Pihkala 2020) and the long-term, far-reaching effects of a strong nature relationship (e.g., Milton 2002; Novitsky-Wahlroos 2019; Lumber et al. 2017), it would seem rather illogical not to include fundamentals of emotional education to the fundamentals of environmental education.

To summarize these notions of environmental education and emotional education, I refer to Carter (2016) who beautifully captures what I have discussed thus far. According to her, the seamless merge of childhood education, environmental education, and social-emotional support is a way to holistic child development. All the parts intertwine and support each other. Nature provides rich learning opportunities and a base for scientific processes to learn about the world around us, but she emphasizes that similar processes and skills are essential when exploring our emotions and solving social problems. Carter (2016, 22) clarifies this connection and leads to my next interest: "Learning in and through nature opens a valuable lens for social and emotional development and for teaching and learning about caring."

2.3 *Caring pedagogy*

There is something in common between emotional education and environmental education, but to find it, one needs to look at the profound foundations of each. The former looks into the relationships between people and the latter into the relationships between humans and the non-human world. Both approaches intend to care – by solving issues of communication, creating reciprocity between parties that still consider each other as separate from each other, and breaking cycles of damage and abuse. To me, caring seems a bond, the common surface between the two approaches. Care is the quality the lack of which we notice quite easily in our relationships with people and in the condition of our environments and the environment at large. Similarly, when care is present, our communities, classrooms, and the natural environment around us thrive. It is like a seed with the power of growth and love that, when carefully tended, can contribute to life that feels more harmonious.

Nel Noddings's (1984, 2012, 2013) theory of care focuses on care ethics from a relational point of view: caring is a relation. According to Noddings (2012), care ethics became a recognised part of moral philosophy in the 1980's, presented by Gilligan (1982) and herself (1984), and later reaching a wide recognition in the fields of psychology, education, and political science to name a few. Bartos (2012), drawing from Tronto (1993), emphasises the political nature of caring. "The politics of care prioritizes the significance of social relations, recognizes the power relations involved in caring relations, and highlights people's needs, responses and responsibilities of caring and being cared for", Bartos (2012, 158) argues. She adds that a focus on care and caring relations allows us to see what people need – which are the most important matters in society. Thus, when looking at children's caring practices one can make certain conclusions about their concerns and values related to the world they want to "preserve and (re)create" (Bartos 2012, 159). Tronto (1993, 61) conceptualizes care as an activity that aims to "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." She sees that the world is a multi-layered and ever intertwining web that consists of the body, the self, and the environment of an individual.

In practice, care can mean caring *for* and caring *about* someone or something (Noddings 2012). Noddings clarifies that caring *about* the weather, the neighbour or the people who suffer in natural catastrophes is more like a concern, whereas caring *for* someone or something always requires a relation between the carer and the cared-for. The difference between caretaking and caring for is similar (Noddings 2013). In addition, Noddings distinguishes natural care and ethical care as different but intertwined and not always easily distinguishable concepts. Natural care is a feeling of “I must” as in a desire, an inner impulse that pushes one to care for something or someone without an ethical effort (Noddings 2013, 75–78). Noddings suggests that we all experience this innate response to care for others, similarly as animals tend for their offspring, but that we also have a choice as to whether we act based on this feeling or not. She argues that the moral to care derives from a desire to remain related with the other, to maintain the caring relation.

Ethical care is then based on natural care, making the former dependent on the latter. Noddings (2013, 147) concludes that “our ethical caring depends upon both our past experience in natural caring and our conscious choice,” and that ethical care is influenced by a sentiment that has led to forming a relation between the one-caring and the cared-for. “We cannot always decide with certainty whether our caring response is natural or ethical. Indeed, the decision to respond ethically as one-caring may cause the lowering of barriers that previously prevented reception of the other, and natural caring may follow”, Noddings (*ibid.*, 79) adds.

As noted by Noddings (2012), caring relations require two counterparts that interact through their roles of a carer and a cared-for. She emphasizes that the mutuality of the relation varies depending on the people in question, but despite the inequality, both roles are needed to build and maintain a relation of caring. According to Noddings (*ibid.*), the roles are exchanged in equal relations, but as one can imagine, a child cannot give back the care received from their parent or teacher in a way that adults are able to exchange the roles of a carer and a cared-for. However, it is important that the cared-for reacts to the caring, whether with a smile, nod, further questions, or any kind of response that tells the carer that the caring has been received. This final response makes it, according to Noddings, a caring *relation*.

Conflicts may also arise when caring is taken into classrooms, based on the tension between expressed and assumed needs for instance (Noddings, 2012). Assumed needs are the ones we often think about, as teachers and institutions: what the students *should* learn according to the curriculum, or how the learning environment or curriculum *should* be adjusted to the needs of the student. By these needs I mean cognitive, motor, and attentive challenges for instance. What Noddings (ibid.) emphasizes in this context of teachers as carers is to follow their motivational displacement, in other words, a “tug toward helping”. Instead of satisfying the assumed needs, the teacher ought to listen to the expressed needs of the students, such as emotional support, moral direction, or something they and others *find* interesting and important (ibid., 772). She suggests that teachers can show their interest on the student’s expressed needs in their attitude or by simply asking what the student is going through. She points out that, consequently, by encouraging the students to think aloud and communicate respectfully, teachers contribute to creating an atmosphere of asking and listening without judgment in their classrooms (that I also witnessed in my empirical study, discussed in Chapters 5.1 and 7.2). If, and when, the expressed need cannot be fulfilled, the teacher’s objective is always to aim for maintaining the caring relation (Noddings 2012).

An interesting change of perspective also happens when asking how the *other* feels instead of how *I* would feel in the same circumstances (ibid.). Connecting empathically with the underlying needs and feelings of the other, whether expressed or assumed, is the first step in connecting with the person and establishing a relation of trust. Marshall Rosenberg (2010) clarifies that empathy means that we are with the other person, whereas sympathy means that we feel the same feeling. He sees the connection to the needs and feelings of ourselves and others as the keys to non-violent communication. Similarly to what Noddings suggests, Rosenberg (ibid.) sees it important to ask and carefully, non-judgementally, listen to what the other person needs and feels at that moment. In order to create a solid base for a relation of care and trust – and the empathic accuracy that may follow as a result of listening, thinking, and elaborating on the expressed needs – one needs to have a dialogue (Noddings 2012). “Pure dialogue” is, according to Buber (2002, 116), what the relation in education is about.

The caring relation in education is worth paying attention to. Buber (2002, 116–117) uses the concept of ‘reality’ when referring to the relation formed between the educator and the student. He describes how this reality between them can only exist when students can trust that the educator gives them their full presence. Although these ideas may have become widely known to the mainstream of Finnish education over the past decades, the importance of the teacher’s presence is nothing but new as Buber’s ideas of pure dialogue in education were originally written in 1925. One reason for the increased awareness of the importance of the teacher’s full presence in the field of education is perhaps due to societal trends like mindfulness and emotional well-being that emphasize the significance of being present for ourselves and in our relationships. It may be easier to understand another person by finding a diagnosis for their behaviour or a solution to their problem, but this is solely analysing them with the mind, not being there, empathically present with them and truly understanding what they are going through. I believe the conflict between assumed and expressed needs of students also contributes to the difficulty of being fully present with the student – if the teacher has a parallel dialogue of their own, about how they should go about with the communication with or education of their student. This is indeed a challenge in today’s society, with all its requirements and changes that seem to constantly increase and request our attention.

To bring the topic of care closer to the nature-aspect of this study, an extensive literature review by Brymer and others (2010) concludes that, the positive impact on wellness – “a balance of the physical, emotional, social, spiritual, occupational and intellectual dimensions” – is related to the opportunity to care for nature and reconnect to an innate aspect of human beings. In their series of studies, Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal and Dolliver (2009) confirmed previous studies claiming that nature connectedness predicts caring actions for the environment. To conclude these notions on care and its importance on the development of children, I quote Noddings (2013, 777):

A climate in which caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all teachers and educational policymakers. In such a climate, we can best meet individual needs, impart knowledge, and encourage the development of moral people. Every teacher is a moral educator, and social/moral issues should be discussed in every class as they arise. A climate of care and trust

is one in which most people will want to do the right thing, will want to be good. We need to spend time in our classrooms talking about the moral problems we all face—the temptation to cheat, to feel envy, fear, anger—and ways to manage them.

3 METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Methodological approach

The core idea of this study is to contribute to the development of educational practices within primary schools in the Finnish context and beyond. By studying the pedagogical practices of a selected school in Spain, I gain a new perspective on how more caring practices could be brought to the Finnish primary schools. Teacher reflection in interviews helps to illustrate the ideas, experiences, and understandings behind the pedagogy. As Alasuutari (2012) reminds in his discussion on interaction in qualitative research, what the interviewee expresses, is not a result per se, but it needs to be reflected within the context of the study, including its core questions and the theoretical lenses through which the researcher looks at the data – without forgetting the context of the interaction on hand.

I engage with a hermeneutic approach in the study. Moreover, this study positions itself in the humanistic social constructionist tradition, where knowledge and conceptions are understood as relative and a construct of our social interaction (see Burr 2003, 2–5, for more). Following Laine (2001), I set out to understand and interpret the teacher and her conceptions of her pedagogical approach, based on a pre-understanding that I had before starting the study and the understanding developed over the course of the study. Our mutual understanding is also important: the communication we shared during the study is strongly based on the existing knowledge, understandings, cultural heritage and even stereotypes of both parties, which requires the attention of the researcher (Laine 2001).

Methodologically this is a case study that engages with a phenomenographic orientation. Following the idea of case study as portrayed by Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006), I describe a specific school and its

pedagogical practices based on field observations over a two-month period and interviews with the teacher-coordinator of the school, and then compare the empirical findings to academic literature and the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. To illustrate the phenomenon of care in this particular school, I observe its functions in natural settings and intend to both understand and describe the context, following the idea of case study as portrayed by Yin (2009, 18). I am looking at a person in her own context, and instead of comparing her views to those of other teachers like in phenomenography (see e.g., Rissanen 2006), I acknowledge that there is a whole range of different ways of seeing the same phenomena.

Rantala (2014) conducted a case study where she studied narrative pedagogics by examining the educational methods used by a musical playschool teacher and concluded that narrative pedagogics serves early music education. This study follows a similar idea: a phenomenon (care in nature-based emotional education) is examined in a particular context (the chosen school), after which conclusions that can help the field of education are drawn. Instead of aiming for generalisations, like Rantala I consider possibilities in which the present findings could benefit Finnish schools and educational communities that wish to bring more caring, social-emotional competences, and nature connectedness to their pedagogical practices. According to Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006), a systematically studied and described case study can offer insights for other cases, too. Studying a case outside of Finland gives a different perspective that can then be used to obtain ideas on how to develop the pedagogical practices in Finnish primary schools.

The phenomenographic traits of this case study are related to the attitude of the researcher: I am looking at a person in her own context, and instead of comparing her views to those of other teachers like in phenomenography (see e.g., Rissanen 2006), I acknowledge that there is a whole range of different ways of seeing the same phenomena. In a school environment, the phenomenographic approach aims to understand the work the teachers do by observing them in their real work environment (Aarnos 2002, as cited by Luukkainen 2004). The idea of looking at the whole context is also present in the characteristics of case study (see e.g., Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). In this study, I was able to gather an idea of the teacher's working environment, educational history, and

personal beliefs, as well as the school's routines and dynamics, which helped me to understand and present her way of seeing her pedagogical methods.

3.2 Analytical framework

FIGURE 1 portrays the analytical framework that combines the three aspects of care as distinguished by Noddings (1984), in the form of a chain of emotional skills, social skills, nature connectedness, and environmental literacy. I consider the latter four aspects intertwined with each other: firstly, as emotional skills impact our social skills and vice versa, secondly, as nature and emotions are also interconnected (as discussed in the previous chapters), and finally, because nature connectedness brings together humans and the natural world and is thus a part of environmental literacy. Each aspect is connected to each other, forming a chain.

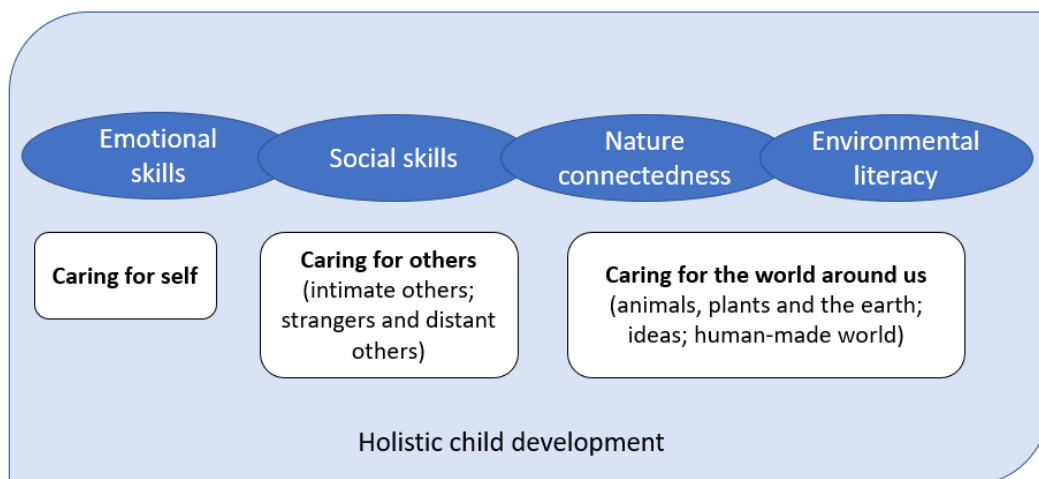


FIGURE 1. Care-based analytical framework

This analytical approach derives from a theoretical framework of care. Carter (2016) introduces the Social-Emotional and Environmental Education Development (SEED) framework as an approach that can be applied to kindergartens and pre-schools with nature-based methods. The SEED framework aims to promote a culture based on nature and connection, and it has three focal points on a three-way continuum: child development, environmental literacy and sustainability, and social and emotional competence. According to

Carter (2016, 20), “The intent of this approach is to provide children with an opportunity to develop connections to people and place, to experience caring, and to develop a sense of wonder and curiosity that will inspire learning.”

Carter’s approach is grounded on Noddings’ (1984) care theory that recognises several aspects of caring: (a) caring for self, (b) caring for intimate others, (c) caring for strangers and distant others, (d) caring for animals, plants, and the earth, (e) caring for the human-made world, and (f) caring for ideas. In this study, I focus on three aspects of care based on Noddings’ domains: care for oneself, the others, and environment. These three aspects and the ways to teach them are carefully integrated in the SEED framework (Carter 2016).

In this study, I use the three-dimensional continuum of the SEED framework to analyse a child’s holistic growth into a caring being – child development, environmental literacy, and social-emotional skills are addressed in parallel with learning to care for self, others and the world around us. To me, these skills and the aspects of care are part of holistic child development that considers the child not only as an individual, but also as a part of their community and the environment. Nature connectedness forms a clear link between us and the natural spaces and elements, opens a different meta-physical level of understanding how we are part of the nature and, as discussed earlier, cultivating nature connectedness plays a significant role in forming caring attitudes towards nature (Mayer et al. 2009). I join Carter and Noddings in the argument that this kind of holistic child development should be the foundation and goal of all education.

3.3 Research site

The reason I have chosen to study an alternative school is both their focus on the social-emotional needs of the children, and the importance of connecting with nature or the pedagogical forest environment the school has. Also, after living in one of the biggest cities in Spain, it seems that many schools in the city have quite small yards more often than not covered by concrete and circled by some trees that arise from holes in the concrete. Children do not necessarily get to experience a direct connection with nature nor are they likely to be encouraged

to play with what they find from the ground. To find schools with forest-like yards, one needs to look at private schools outside the city streets.

In the school where this study was conducted, there are two hectares of organic cultivation land and a young forest that has been planted recently and now looks more like a field of grass with young trees. They used to go to a nearby pine forest on their forest school days every other week but paused the expeditions due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic and stay near the school instead. The children have a clear understanding of the borders within which they can move during the school day, and they have been advised to let the teachers know if they are going further. In this pedagogical forest environment, the children are free to play among the mandarin and pomegranate trees, climb them, swing from their branches, and give nutshells for their roots. They have toys, tables, chairs, and other objects around and between the natural objects, and their games often include both manmade and natural objects. FIGURE 2 shows parts of the pedagogical forest environment of the school.



FIGURE 2. Pedagogical forest environment of the studied school

This school was founded by a teacher whom I call Emma, to protect the anonymity of the school and its people, together with some families who wanted to have their children in the new school. There are currently 14 children from 8 families in the school, their ages varying between three and eleven years. Approximately half of them attend this school from Monday to Friday, and the other half only three days a week as they are either home-schooled or unschooled. Emma, the director and coordinator of the school, has another teacher assisting her on the days when all the children come to school. I call her Silvia. She works as Emma's right hand and gives ideas for forest school days and other projects or workshops. She helps Emma in keeping track of the children's holistic development, including but not limited to academic and social-emotional skills.

3.4 Data collection and thematic care analysis

I used participatory observation and theme interviews as data collection methods. Observation gives information about what people are doing and what is happening in the space we share (Anttila 1996, 218). Observation as a data collection method can be challenging, and especially as a participating observer, the researcher must be aware of one's impact on the situation (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 102–103). I decided to participate as a part of my observation as I wanted to create a relation with the children that would then make it easier for them to have me listening their vulnerable moments when playing or solving conflicts. I became a part of their community, which gave the study more depth. What I was observing, was the ways the three aspects of care are present in the play, learning, communication, and attitudes of the school members. I recorded conversations between children and adults, took videos of some conflicts and learning opportunities, and took pictures of the learning settings and dynamics on hand – focusing on the way the teacher works with the children. This enabled me to return to the moments later and consider the data in the light of my research questions and theoretical framework without forgetting what took place on those days.

However, as Anttila (1996, 218) reminds, observing people does not tell me why they act in such way, which is why I interviewed the teacher. The interviews

were individual theme interviews with broad questions based on my research questions. Theme interviews give space for the interviewee to talk uninterruptedly and more in depth although the researcher makes sure to address everything needed for the study, and it may give more space for the interviewee to discuss topics that are not commonly discussed (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). Since the interest of the study is aimed at the pedagogical approach of the teacher, theme interview seems ideal to support her personal reflection.

Each interview was about 15 minutes long and they took place right after each observation day. On the last day there was no interview but a more casual and personal conversation that is not included in the data. I transcribed the recorded interviews and translated them from Spanish to English. I found it beneficial for my study to allow the teacher to answer freely and expand the conversation if she felt the need to address something I had not, which brings the theme interviews close to open conversations (see e.g., Eskola & Suoranta 1998, Chapter 3). By doing this, I created a space for the teacher to reflect on her work and the balance between the three aspects of care in her school.

The teacher's reflection on the interviews help analyse the pedagogy, but the base of studying the pedagogical practices is created by observing the daily practices of the school in their full context since my interest lies in the pedagogy. As Eskola and Suoranta (1998) describe, the observation can be led by either the events taking place or a systematic observation plan. With the research questions in mind, I was open for the events of the day to lead the observation quite freely. When observing the children and adults in the school for four days over a period of two months, I was able to follow and understand their routines, pedagogical practices, and some group dynamics, letting the events lead my observation. This allowed me a deeper understanding of how this particular community and its pedagogical approach works, which then gives more depth to my analysis. The long observation period also gave me time to read and familiarize myself with the methods they use, reflect my observations in relation to academic literature, and see everything from a different perspective every time I went to observe, which is an important aspect of qualitative research (Kiviniemi 2018). Thanks to the photos, videos, and pieces of conversations recorded, I am now able to share the understanding I gathered over the observation days and

thus provide more data to support my conclusions on the topics addressed in the interviews.

The data collected was analysed using content analysis. First, I looked at the school and the teacher's practices as a whole, focusing on how it functions, what kinds of structures there are and how the community works, in order to understand the context of the case study. Then, by using content analysis, I looked for the notions in recorded interaction and interviews that are connected to caring for self, others, or one's environment, and reorganised the data according to these three themes, as Eskola (2018) recommends. I was also interested in notions related to social-emotional skills, nature connectedness and environmental literacy and included the notions related to them in the three main themes, emotional skills under care for self, social skills under care for others and nature connectedness under care for the environment.

After that, I looked for themes, practices or topics that seemed to repeat themselves or were meaningful for the teacher or myself regarding the theoretical framework. These formed the subcategories of the three dimensions of care, enabling me show how each aspect of care is present in this particular school. I collected quotes that represented these themes and chose the most representative ones (Eskola *ibid.*). Following Eskola (*ibid.*), the next phase was to create links to the relevant academic literature and bring the conclusions based on these findings to the context of Finnish primary school pedagogy.

3.5 Ethical considerations and validity

Following the phenomenographic tradition, this is a study where experiences and understandings are conveyed with words, which means that I must be aware of my influence when observing, engaging with, and interviewing participants (Laine 2001). I enter their private space as an outsider with some expectations and my own understanding of the things I am studying, so I must consider my verbal and non-verbal communication carefully (Tobin 2012). As I immerse myself in the community to some extent, I acknowledge that even my presence as a researcher has an impact on the people whose space I enter (Iphofen & Tolich 2018, 540).

Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) guidelines (2019) remind that in order for the participants to feel respected and to be able to trust

the researcher, which is a key starting point for any research within human sciences, it is important to familiarise oneself with the community and its culture beforehand. I consider this aspect taken care of since I made sure to get to know each child and gain their trust by letting them approach me when they were ready. I also had a video-meeting with the teacher beforehand, so that we could both get to know each other before I entered the school. In every moment I have acknowledge that I must respect the dignity and humanity of each participant and cause no harm (Eskola & Suoranta 1998).

The autonomy of the participants was respected following the ethical principles of TENK (2019). Participants gave their informed consent to participate, as required by TENK. All parents and children agreed that the children can be photographed, as long as the faces cannot be identified, and so did the teachers. In the information letter (Appendix 1), I explained what the study is about, what it means to participate in it, and how their answers and personal data will be used and taken care of (*ibid.*). The participants were reminded of their freedom to decline or stop participating at any point, which is essential with regard to the ethics of the research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998). TENK reminds that despite parental consent, minors are eventually the ones deciding to participate. To comply with this, I started the first field day by telling children why I was there, that I was going to take pictures, videos and record some situations, and asked whether everyone agrees with this. I reminded them that they can tell me at any point if they no longer wish me to do some or any of the afore mentioned.

I have followed the ethical principles of TENK when processing the personal data and protecting the privacy of my participants. I used my personal mobile phone to take pictures and videos and record observations and interviews. I uploaded the recordings, pictures, and videos in the cloud service of Tampere University that only I can access through a double identification. I had a research diary and the notepad of my mobile phone with me on the field days so that I could write my own thoughts and perceptions during and after the day. The digital notes are stored in the same cloud service as all other data and my research diary is safeguarded so that no-one can read it. In this study, I have taken measures to protect the anonymity of all the participants. I have given each participant a pseudo name according to their gender, in order to maintain an interaction with people instead of codes in the text. The participants do not know

their own pseudo names, nor those of others. I have not included any personal information that could be used to identify any individual, and the links between the participants and their pseudo names are in a separate document that only I can access in the cloud (see TENK 2019). I will destroy all the data related to any participant or school once the thesis has been approved, and the participants have been informed about it.

Language also plays an important role when it comes to interpreting and presenting the words of the participants. With Emma and most of the children, we communicated in Spanish, and with some children in English. Most of the participants also speak Valencian, which is a local language in the area. I understood something but could not understand all the conversations held in Valencian. Neither English nor Spanish is my native language, which may have caused misunderstandings of nuances, idioms, or references in the language. They may also have been misunderstood in the process of translating the conversations into English. Having recorded the interviews and observations, I can better understand the participants if some things were left unclear during the encounter. I also used different dictionaries to create a translation that conveys the message of the speaker.

Cultural differences between me and the participants are important to acknowledge in my expectations and in the situations in the field. Overall, it is important to be aware of the diversity of the people and environments that participate in this study and understand the findings as a description of individual cases that cannot be generalised. I was able to gather an idea of the teacher's working environment, educational history, and personal beliefs, as well as the school's routines and dynamics, which helped me to understand and present her way of seeing her pedagogical methods. Throughout the study, I have kept in mind that the conceptions of this teacher are unique and cannot be used to generalise all teachers of alternative pedagogies, for instance.

4 CARE FOR THE SELF

Based on a content analysis of the field observations and the teacher's reflection in the interviews, I found three themes that seemed important in relation to encouraging the children to care for self: looking after one's body, working on emotional skills and taking charge of one's own learning through self-directing skills.

4.1 Looking after one's body

Caring for the self is fundamental, and perhaps the most important part of it is to keep the physical body alive and healthy. Observations related to one's body are always connected to what is happening outside of the body: ongoing activities, the weather, interesting things in the environment and so on. What Emma mentioned was feeding the body and making sure it is not too hot or cold. Emma encouraged her students to take responsibility over their bodies, so that they would learn to connect with their basic needs and the limits and abilities of their body. Carter (2016) clarifies that encouraging children to engage in behaviours that are safe and show responsibility over oneself are the ways in which the deeper level of caring for self can be seen in practice. This responsibility as a means of caring for oneself can also include recognizing feelings of hunger and acting upon that. In the studied school, children were encouraged to eat when they need to. During snack time, the children gathered around and were using their own consideration about what to eat and how much. This, of course, depends on the age of the children too, as Emma reminds.

“-- Today Candela came to me and said: “Did you already have the second snack?” and I said “yes” (with a tone sounding like “of course, why?”). [Candela:] “I didn't realise it”. I said: “you were with the stones and we said it, and you didn't come.” So I don't... It's a 11-year-old girl too, if she was smaller, different. But at 11 years old, I won't go behind [her] “hey come and eat a banana”, no. You have to take care of yourself and connect with your need to eat. -- So if this happened to her today, I'm sure that tomorrow she

will remember and come to eat. And this is self-care for me. -- When you realise "Oh, I'm cold. I put on the coat. It's hot, I take it off. --" (Emma, teacher)

The pedagogical forest environment challenged the children to test their abilities and find the limits of their body. When playing outside in the pedagogical forest environment, children often wanted to climb in the trees or the ladders that the landowner sometimes left next to mandarin trees. In this school, the children were encouraged to find those abilities and limits safely (Carter 2016) without hurting themselves or others. Daniel was not very experienced with climbing yet and did not know how to come down from the tree. He was low enough to be lifted down, but Emma used another strategy so that next time Daniel climbs a tree, he would remember to only go so high that he can come down as well.

Daniel: Laura can you lift me down? I just can't get down.

Emma: You can do it yourself. [If] we go up to the place, we can go down. So I can help you with my voice, but I'm not going to take you. So, you can put your foot here.

Daniel: Yeah but I can't.

Emma: So, you can place your hands here, and try. Or you can jump from here. And I'm here. But I'm not going to get you. You jump...

Daniel: Okay, I need a hand.

Emma: Yes, that's alright. [Daniel jumps holding Emma's hand] Thank you. And remember, we climb to the places we can go down by ourselves.

Daniel: Next time I climb the tree, I'll... I'll remember [inaudible]

Emma: You can try now! Yes. I'm just here.

By refusing to lift the child down, she gave him an opportunity to try his own abilities and perhaps understand how important it is to remember to climb safely. It seemed that the children who had been in the school for a longer time already had an idea of what they are capable of and did not ask for Emma's help with climbing, nor was she offering it unless asked. However, she was present in the moment and showing it to the child with her body (FIGURE 3) and calm voice.



FIGURE 3. Teacher's body language when guiding a student

4.2 Working on emotional skills

In this school, there was a clear emphasis on working on emotional skills. That was visible in the way conflicts were solved and in the way children's actions were seen by the teacher. Compassion, empathy, active listening, and understanding the phases of child development seemed to be some of the ways Emma used to respect the inner work everyone is going through with their emotional skills. As discussed earlier, it is very important for a teacher to take care of themselves and be emotionally balanced, to be able to help their students (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 85). Emma has routines both before and after work that include meditation, yoga, being in nature, art and self-study related to education. This is a good example of how the inner balance of the teacher is a result of conscious action and a holistic balance of physical, mental, and emotional health.

Sometimes it's a bit... It affects me a lot too, everything that happens, because they're things that affect. So I try to take care of myself as well. -- before the day, I meditate and practice yoga before coming. And then in the afternoon, I'm in the nature. Trees, animals... I also draw, I like to paint, and to dance. Like doing things that fill me... Studying things too, sometimes about education too, because it fascinates me -- Also talking about it to my partner. Sometimes I tell him a bit what happened. (Emma, teacher)

Supporting the development of a healthy self-esteem is part of the inner work in emotional education (see e.g., Avola & Pentikäinen 2019). This understanding

was visible in the way Emma helped the children with their inner work and insecurities. She understood that insecurity and not knowing what to do, in this case how to use one's body in football, is often the underlying cause of minor and major conflicts such as this conflict related to violent behaviour in football.

So, one option would be to take out the football. But this is not realistic, because if you take out the problem, and you don't look at what's happening, which is people with a low self-esteem, who need to lift their self-esteem and also to control their body. (Emma, teacher)

This kind of deep understanding of the underlying causes of behaviour seemed to be at the core of the pedagogy. Emma described that the root cause to a reaction such as escaping, attacking, or freezing, can be derived from a sense of victimhood. She also understood how we can react to problems as we encounter them. According to Emma, as quoted below, accompanying a child through a problem requires that the teacher works on their own inner world, which is also what Avola and Pentikäinen (2019) underline when it comes to teaching emotional skills.

-- it's necessary to do a strong inner work with the victim that's inside me and with the aggressor that's inside me. And with the witness that's inside me. Because if I don't work on that, when I see a problem, I'm going to want to survive. And I'm going to want to survive by fleeing, attacking or... being frozen. -- So to get out of this (snaps her fingers) ... which is a reaction, I have to work on my victim and I have to work on my aggressor... in order to be able to accompany an aggressor... in quotation marks, or to be able to accompany a victim in quotation marks. Because in reality they both are victims. Both of them... the one who aggresses the other, aggresses them for something." (Emma, teacher)

Daily interaction between teachers and students was characterised by validation. The children were seen and heard with their emotions and their personalities. In the interview, Emma clarified that she considers it important to validate the feelings of the children in order not to suppress any of them. She uses questions to ask how the child is feeling and uses her voice and body language to react to the feelings of the children. In several occasions, she first acknowledged the pain, frustration, or anger of the child with her words and an empathetic tone, which is the kind of modelling Carter (2016) suggests as part of emotional education.

-- usually when a boy or a girl enters an explosion, the adult tends to go to oppress that. So the way to work on it here is that the adult as well goes "woah!" the adult also does "ahh!" and leaves space, right? Being with the

boy or the girl and also “woah!”, like validating, validating the emotion, right? Not oppressing it... There was a moment when Leo climbed up a ladder and he went “Emma!” I don’t know what... And I told him “Woah!” (laughs) Sounds, right? Energy. (makes more sounds) So that they notice the energy and feel validated. And then between brothers, well... Of course... You saw me, I leave space so that they get settled.” (Emma, teacher)

Being assertive and expressing one’s needs was encouraged. Emma specified that they are an important part of caring for self. Saying what one likes or does not like is a part of it – some children seemed to be struggling with daring to say no for others when they wanted to be alone or felt uncomfortable in a situation, and Emma helped them find a way to express those feelings. She sees assertion as a significant part of caring for the self:

“Yes, to take care of oneself, I like the power of being able to say what you like and what you don’t like. And to be able to be assertive. Because for me it’s the biggest care, the assertiveness.” (Emma, teacher)

Emma often gave the children some phrases as a model that they can use when they do not like something or feel uncomfortable, as for example in these two situations. There was a day when one of the students was running away from his little brother, which then turned into a conflict between them, and the bigger brother started to hit the younger one. The bigger one wanted to be alone, so according to Emma, he must learn to say it without needing to express it by running away and hitting his brother. Here Emma describes the situation between the brothers and what she suggested to the one hitting. She also asked the boy to tell the thing to his brother, not to Emma, and this also repeated with other children in other situations.

“--- he doesn’t tell his brother “I want to be alone”, he hits him straight away. So the work is that.. he connects with... “I don’t like this, I like to be alone” and being able to ask for it with the mouth, not to go to hit. (Emma, teacher)

Another girl got embarrassed when they were reading a book about the intimate parts of the female body, so her mother requested a meeting with Emma, who then explained the girl what she can do in similar situations – validating her feeling of embarrassment and modelling her a way to express her need.

“So she explained me that her daughter felt very very embarrassed, and wasn’t able to tell me, the girl, that she didn’t want to listen to the story at that moment. She does find the theme interesting, but she feels embarrassed

when there are boys. She prefers to do it in a more private environment only with herself, or with girls. This is completely understandable. So I asked the girl, with the mom. And what we do is a transfer of trust. Your mom is your being of trust, and I'm here as an adult, as a being of trust. Your two people of trust are together, and we are going to talk the three of us. So after having talked with the mom, the girl comes, and we do the work of talking together and asking... of telling the girl: "What's happening to you?" So the girl tells it to me with her words feeling supported because her mom is with her. So the girl told me she felt very embarrassed, so I told her that she can tell me, always, "It's too much (in Spanish)" "It's too much (in English). I need to get out of the activity, I need to do another thing". And that she can tell it to me whispering, if she wants no-one to hear her. There's no problem." (Emma, teacher)

Sometimes Emma suggested another way to channel and manage the hard emotions without harming anyone. Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 159) indeed suggest that guiding children with their negative emotions is significant from the point of view of their emotional competences. An example of this is a conflict that Lucas and Enzo had with snow: Enzo had accidentally hit Lucas with a snowball, covering his face and hair with snow. This made Lucas very angry, and he threw a snowball on Lucas. Emma first acknowledged and empathised with the anger of Lucas and then explained that in the beginning of the game she explained that some snow may fall on the players by accident during the game. By giving Lucas a clear instruction to tell an adult in future situations like this one, she gave him a strategy to manage the impulse of frustration, as described here:

Emma: So what happened to you? You got very angry and you went near to throw snow on him. Did you need to revenge? Mmm.

Enzo: You can't do that, we already said it!

Emma: the thing is that he got so angry and he thought you did it on purpose

Enzo: I told him there. It was an accident, and at least he could get to tell it to you and not go and throw [snow] at me.

Emma [to Lucas]: How does it seem to you? That when you get angry, you come and tell me, and I come. Instead of throwing the ice there. Because it can also happen to you, that when you're playing you throw [the snow] by accident.

By showing respect to the children, the teacher gives an example of respect. For the teacher of the studied school, it seemed important to treat the feelings of vulnerability, shame and embarrassment with respect towards the children. In

moments where a child was embarrassed, Emma gave them space in front of others, but later addressed the topic individually in a safe environment.

“[After being asked to say three nice things to a friend that Pedro rejected earlier] I noticed that this boy, Pedro, you saw that he felt bad, his eyes were filled with tears, he felt very... -- So I noticed that it was too much, and I told him: “Look, you’ll do it later privately, but you’ll do it.” (Emma, teacher)

“So the girl told me she felt very embarrassed, so I told her that she can tell me, always, “It’s too much (in Spanish)” “It’s too much (in English). I need to get out of the activity, I need to do another thing”. And that she can tell it to me whispering, if she wants no-one to hear her. There’s no problem.” (Emma, teacher)

Overall, I observed a link between the teacher’s own socio-emotional skills and the way she guided the children to learn them. By validating their feelings, modelling how to express them and respecting everyone with what they were feeling, Emma created an atmosphere that encourages to care for the self. The social situations described above start from caring for the self before the changes can be seen in our relationships and communication with others. Therefore, I include this inner work with emotions and emotional skills in the section of care for the self, despite its intertwinement with caring for others, and the fact that when doing the inner work with ourselves, social relations are often impacted as a consequence.

4.3 Taking charge of one’s own learning through self-directing skills

Responsibility seemed an important theme throughout the days. The children are given a lot of (age-appropriate) responsibility regarding what they study, play, do, or eat, including with whom and for how long. This way they get more opportunities to be self-directing and influence their learning process, which, according to Haataja (2014), is a prerequisite of showing signs of growing into responsibility. By taking responsibility for one’s learning, the child also learns to care for themselves as they test and improve their limits and abilities. In the school of this study, children take responsibility in choosing activities, committing to workshops, and preparing games. To an observer, the school seemed therefore more chaotic than a regular classroom indoors – there was less control

in the hands of adults. Letting go of the need to control and giving more responsibility to the children has not always been easy for the teacher.

“The thing is that I’ve been doing this for some years and I... but yes, the controlling is as if the responsibility is on you, and no, it’s about letting go of the control and it’s on them.” (Emma)

The children had opportunities to suggest workshops, and I observed a beautiful chain of learning on the third observation day. Enzo explained Emma how he had seen a video of a bird trap and said that he would like to make one there at school as a workshop. Emma decided to take advantage of his excitement and changed her plans for the afternoon. The ones who were interested gathered around some tables and chairs. Enzo typed the search words in a search engine on Emma’s phone, surrounded by everyone in the workshop. They found a video and then thought what kind of material they would need. Emma said it would be important to draw a plan of the trap and write down the materials, including the amounts. All this included lots of learning – drawing, writing, counting pieces and problem solving – and made students accountable for their own progress when they had to ask others what to do next or whether their words were correctly written. This activity came from the student’s own interest and required a lot of self-directing skills. In FIGURE 4, a student shows his plan.

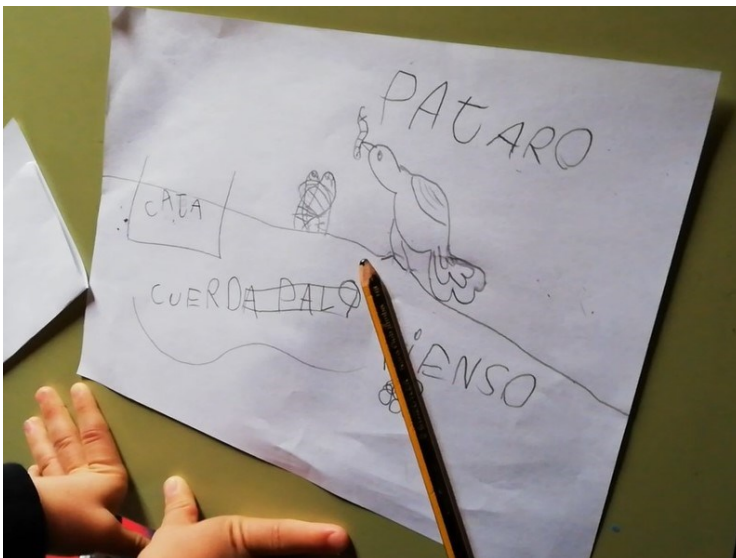


FIGURE 4. A student planning the bird trap

Teacher's support and students' collaboration in tasks that require self-directing skills seemed important. One student had to take more responsibility in the planning and leading of the process, and to come up with ideas on how to make the trap work. The group was looking at him when they needed to know how many sticks the trap would require, but everyone was trying to solve the physics of how to keep the trap open for an animal to get in. Emma was supporting him and the others all the time, helping to write, and suggesting next steps with questions, but then moved slightly away again giving space to the children again. This followed exactly what Haataja (2014) found important in her study: to become braver in taking responsibility, the children in her study needed encouragement from the teacher and the peers.

The limits set by the teacher work as borders within which the children get to practice their self-directing skills and responsibility. As football started to gain interest among some students, other games became less interesting. On the first observation day, there was a pirate game available for everyone, but some children preferred to play football. Here Emma explains how the limits she set impacted the choice of the students who decided to play football elsewhere instead of participating in the game.

“Other days they're not so much [into football]. For example I thought that they were going to play the pirate game, because at the beginning of the day... no, last week when I talked about this activity, they said they liked it. But today, perhaps I made a mistake of putting a strong limit, because I told them “you help to build the ship or you don't play, or later if you want to play, you help to tidy up”. And they have a problem with tidying up and helping... the two things... so then they didn't want to play anymore.” (Emma, teacher)

There were other similar situations that Emma referred to in our conversations, like this one where the children took some stones from a stone wall surrounding the fields, which made the landowner angry. In this case the children took responsibility for their actions, and without adults' request, some put the missing stones back. Emma acknowledged her role as the one setting limits and expressed her confusion about the limits for this situation.

“-- today for example María got mad because they took things from the [stone] wall, and I didn't put a strong limit well. I got confused about the limit, I thought that they could take a stone and put it back to a place... Of course, there they saw that they had done harm, say, to the surroundings, to another person. And then some children took the stone and put it [on the wall], and I

liked this attitude, because in the past they stayed with their arms crossed like this, (showing and laughing) angry, and it seemed more mature to me to face someone who is angry, an adult, and take the stone and put it back.”
(Emma, teacher)

A culture that is open for questions and dialogue was present throughout the days. Opportunities to learn occurred naturally and children took initiative in asking whatever it was that interested them. The way these children came to ask me about the Finnish mythology showed me, how normal it is for them to ask questions from adults and see what the adult tells or finds out after a quick investigation right there, right then. However, there is also space, according to the teacher, for further exploration of any topic the children find interesting. Also, the way children are encouraged to suggest projects that are then taken into action, indicates to me as an outsider, how the idea, that learning can take place wherever, whenever, and by whom ever, is deeply rooted in this particular community. This school seems to follow the same idea as bell hooks (2003, 42) articulates when defining the qualities of democratic education: learning is considered seriously, meaningful in itself, and something that “enriches life in its entirety”. In this school, there is no division between classroom and the world – learning takes place upstairs and outdoors, in and between projects, workshops, games and free play (see e.g. Ibid. 44), which supports the development of self-directing skills and creative use of learning environments indoors and outdoors.

5 CARE FOR OTHERS

This chapter discusses how social aspects of caring were present in the school. Communication played an important role when it came to solving conflicts in a respectful and systematic way. Many daily routines and child-led activities also included taking or being given a role. Through these roles, the children had opportunities to practice caring for others. An attitude of caring and the routines built to encourage it were key to making caring for others a part of the normal way the community works.

5.1 Communicating through challenges

Learning socio-emotional competences requires practice, and a large part of that is communicating with others in a caring and respectful way. Conflicts arose, and they were great situations for the children to practice assertion, expressing their needs and acknowledging their bodies – in other words, their care for the self. The teacher's consistent and calm communication helped the children move through disagreements of different densities; consistent in a way that she addressed every disagreement and made sure everyone felt seen and heard, and calm in a way that her words and reactions did not emit judgement or provocation towards the children but instead made them feel validated in their emotions and safe to feel and express. She seemed to focus on the three starting points of emotional education: safety, strengthening the good, and compassion (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 172).

Conflicts often arose from misunderstandings in either communication or observations of some behaviour or action. Clarifying those misunderstandings is essential. I pointed out to Emma that there seems to be a lot of communication during the day from her part – with the children, their parents and her colleague – and she agreed that communication is indeed needed, especially due to the vulnerability and the personal nature of the topics present in conflicts.

“Yes, a lot of communication. And we do it like this, because it works when there’s a lot of communication, because otherwise, we people tend to dream up things, create stories in our heads, that might not have happened exactly like that. And keep in mind that we address topics that are very taboos sometimes, like sexuality which is a topic that’s still a taboo in this society. Or topics like aggression, bullying, that we have talked about, to throw things... So they are delicate topics. That’s why it’s good to clarify.” (Emma, teacher)

Higgings (2011) recommends the teacher familiarises themselves with the family life and background of the child so as to understand their preparedness to express their emotions and experiences. In the study school, the teacher meets the family beforehand for the same purpose. Communication with the families is extended over the school year as each family has many meetings with Emma. Every time either the family or the teacher considers a meeting necessary, they organise one spontaneously or arrange a longer one for another day. Emma emphasised that she works a lot with the families and that face-to-face communication is very important.

In the nature-based caring pedagogy of this school, emotions are treated with respect and are not suppressed (see Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 158). For example, the teacher often let the children release their anger or frustration at first, when solving a conflict. They may have talked at the same time, raised their voices, and explained to Emma why the others were wrong. Only after a while would Emma require them to take turns and respect the turns of others. This release of big emotions is a crucial part of a conflict and helps equip the child with tools for managing heavier emotions that could impact their learning if left unaddressed (Wortha et al. 2019). Here Emma refers to four stages of conflict and how important the initial release of emotions is according to her.

“And I also think that if I’m interested in peace, it’s important for me to also be interested in war, and fighting, and the four stages of conflict. The first one is “It’s okay, we’re fine” and number two is the fight, so it’s also necessary. For example the children. They had a moment with the leaves “you’re destroying the leaf! The leaf has a life!” I didn’t say anything about the leaves that they fall, I didn’t say anything. I’m there giving my presence. And sometimes I tell them “tell it to him” like “look at him. I’m here, but I support you and that’s all.” And finally they got into a fight “woa woa woa” one says something, another one... [accelerating] And later there was a moment when one of them said, perhaps what you said is true. And this is already the third stage. You give the other a percentage of truth. Not the whole truth, but you realise that the other has a percentage of truth. And so the encounter is created, the relation. I’m not interested in them ending it well. -- There’s no need for them to end it being super close friends. What

I'm interested in is the relation of different stands. I think one way, you think another way. -- And that there should be relations between differences. This is deep democracy. The diversity. And being able to be in the same space being diverse." (Emma)

Emma also refers to the caring relation between different parties, and how important it is to create and maintain it. It resembles what Noddings (2012) also emphasizes: even more important than fulfilling the needs of the students is to make sure the caring relation remains between the parties. This fresh relation between differences is the seed of acknowledgement and respect towards differences. Mutual respect plays an important role in making the atmosphere of this school more inclusive (Takala et al. 2020), which then improves the emotional wellbeing of students and thus learning outcomes (Kyrö-Ämmälä & Arminen 2020).

As discussed, communication in conflicts helps to clarify misunderstandings and develop one's social skills. Emma's way of addressing disagreements was open-minded and she seemed genuinely interested in what the other feels and needs in the challenging situation. Kleipoedszus (2011) sees that having one's perspective, behaviours or attitudes challenged by another person may be a starting point of personal growth and learning about oneself; when one challenges another person, they have a chance to learn to understand each other better. Emma considers conflicts as opportunities of growth:

When there's a problem or a conflict, I think "this shouldn't be happening" and then I connect with another part of myself and I say "okay, I open myself to what is. I open myself to the life, I open myself to this situation, I open myself to these children". So I open myself and I'm tolerating the conflict... with limits. When I say the conflicts are a lever of evolution, it doesn't mean that we'd get... beat up... that we'd get hurt. It doesn't mean that. But it does mean using our strength in a coherent way. (Emma, teacher)

In a conflict that arose from throwing leaves, she clearly acknowledged both boys and their frustration that came from being hurt, and wanted to hear them, validate their feelings, and bring them together to talk about what happened. The openness described above can be seen in the way she addressed both boys.

"Lucas said: "Oliver hit me" and I said "okay". I went to see Oliver. And I didn't go with the energy of "what did you do". I went with the energy "Oliver, what do you need? Lucas told me that you hit him. What happened?" "The thing is, he threw a leaf on me. It went into my eye." And I said: "Okay, let's go and

talk with him! And tell him everything, that it hurt you when the leaf went into your eye” (with a tone similar to the boy’s frustration)” (Emma)

Conflicts give important signals of what needs more attention among the students. They are thus a way some children get to practice how to express their needs. There was a rather intense conflict related to football: a girl who wanted to play with the group of boys was not well included in the game and did not like their violent way of playing. Emma acknowledged that the children need help with the rules and techniques of football so that they would not be constantly hurting each other physically and verbally.

“So, one option would be to take out the football. But this is not realistic, because if you take out the problem, and you don’t look at what’s happening, -- For me, what’s healthy is... that the game is there, but with rules of coexistence. And that’s why there are problems surging, so the conflicts help us set healthy limits. Not avoiding the situation. -- if we take it out, we lose the opportunity to learn.” (Emma, teacher)

Kleipoedszus (2011) argues that it is worthwhile taking the risk of a conflict that may arise when an educator challenges the child, like in this case of challenging the way children play football: the children suggested one of them could be a judge. Eventually, the conflict that arose, helped the teacher see what the children need and gave her an opportunity to act upon that. In this case the teacher decided to invite a female football coach to the school as a response to the lack of skills and a low self-esteem of the players.

“Also, a moment I went to Lydia, and there was a moment that she was talking against. Her opinion was against many people. -- So there we need to support her. And then, because her voice was much in the minority, I went to reinforce. “Hey thank you for saying, thank you for your courage.” -- And she smiled, right? Because “ayy, a [female] coach will come!”” (Emma, teacher)

In this school, there was a daily structure that created several opportunities for communication, addressing disagreements or disappointments and solving conflicts. Every day started and ended with a circle they called the circle of fire. These were circles where the children and teachers would share things that they find important or what to suggest to the group. Every day one child was responsible for giving turns to speak, even to the teachers, and to announce that the circle has ended. Bliss, Robinson and Maines (1995, 6–7) suggest that this kind of circle time gives the children consent and permission to share their

feelings and learn about those of others, as well as the opportunity to look at themes like friendships, conflicts, or loss (which were all addressed in the circles during my fieldwork days). Here Emma describes the different circles and how families are sometimes included as well spontaneously.

“-- we don't punish, but we do talk a lot, again and again. And at the end of the day, in the big circle, we talk about things, problems that have occurred that day, or about suggestions. And, eh... I take advantage of when the dads and moms come, to make another [parent-child] circle to reinforce. -- So there's work with the boys and girls, and also a bit with the families. And then there are follow-up meetings with the families.” (Emma, teacher)

Communication in conflict situations was consistent. Emma used so called mini-circles as a way to pause and talk about a disagreement between the children or children and the teacher(s). Being in a mini-circle meant that the child(ren) involved in the disagreement gathered together with the teacher. Emma often let everyone tell what action they had observed, how they felt about it, and what they would need. After that Emma often asked the children what should be done; setting a rule, restoring a broken rule or something else that would help to have everyone's needs met. The pattern was the same no matter the size or intensity of the topic at hand. This pattern is very similar to that of non-violent communication, presented by Rosenberg (2010).

Addressing rejection in a circle of fire was a good example of giving value to caring for others. On a forest-school day, the children were divided into groups, which made some of them show verbally and non-verbally that they were not content with their group members. Emma mentioned it at the moment, but then addressed it in the final circle of the day in the form of a drama play, emphasizing empathy and compassion towards others. She gave those who showed rejection to their peers and opportunity to restore their words by saying three things they are grateful for about the friend. Addressing rejection again in the circle of fire showed the children that it is important and serious, as Emma describes.

“-- for example rejecting others. So, how do we work on it? It's marked at the beginning, but perhaps it's not worked on at the same moment, like you saw, we did it at the end. Because... to give it a value, an importance.” Emma (teacher)

Addressing the problem in the circle of fire clearly gave relief to some children who had been hurt by the rejecting reactions of others. Noddings (2012)

underlines that when clarifying matters with the whole group after noticing the same topic repeating itself in small groups, like rejection in this case, the children and the teacher learn from the errors and also get to know each other better.

Creating a shape of a circle signalled privacy; it appeared to be an important sign for the children to know they are in a safe container and also a reminder to respect the mini-circles of others by not interrupting them. However, by letting others observe the circle silently without intervening, the teacher showed that disagreements are a part of life and that they are important so that we can live better together – there is nothing to be ashamed of and no need to hide these conversations from others. It was also a good opportunity for others to see the model of communicating feelings and needs. In addition to safety and modelling, by closing the circle, the teacher can better guide the children in their processes of managing difficult feelings. Perhaps the understanding and openness to adapt, that teachers engaging with emotional education need (Higgings 2011), is easier to achieve when the situation is more controlled and contained in the form of a circle.

Making everyone feel accepted as a member of the community and express themselves was a critical part of the pedagogical approach of the studied school. Transmitting these messages to children who are still building their self-image is indeed the responsibility of the teacher (Bliss et al. 1995, 5). These children knew they can express their vulnerabilities and worries in the circles, because others are not allowed to put them down with negative comments or non-verbal reactions, and nobody is forced to share anything (see Bliss et al. 1995). I witnessed this in the behaviour of a child, who admitted in the final circle that he did not like the violence in football, although he had, only moments before, told me that he does not mind being hit; he felt safer to express himself in the circle.

This kind of brave expression of one's vulnerability was acknowledged in the school by complimenting and thanking the child privately. It is also discussed a lot in academic literature related to positive pedagogy. Complimenting a child and looking at their success and goodness instead of only looking at negative behaviour is a way to show that the teacher believes in them (Bliss et al. 1995), but it also helps them feel positive emotions which are beneficial for being more present in interaction and finding diverse solutions to problems (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 154). Complimenting a child when they remember not to touch

the ladder or when they open themselves up for vulnerability, is like the positive enforcement that Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 345) suggest as a part of a feedback that supports learning and wellbeing.

Smaller conflicts arise during the day and not all of them need a mini-circle or a meeting with parents. Here the teacher's presence and calmness are essential, and in Emma's case, she seemed to have a calming effect on children who were going through hard emotions. She often helped children to understand that another child may have misunderstood something or done harm by accident. This prevents disagreements that could later become antipathies in friendships or problems at a larger level.

5.2 Caring for others through different roles within the group

In the school, the children had rotating tasks like giving turns to speak in fire circles and setting the table for lunch that encouraged them to care for others. When these roles are implemented in the daily structure, everyone gets to practice how to care for others, and they see the model of others too. Nobody is too young for these tasks, yet the youngest ones were supported according to their developmental stage.

“Let's see, it seems to me that all this about sharing tasks, about caring, sends a message of taking care of oneself, and taking care of the others. -- So it all goes together in the sense that every day it's someone's turn to for example set the fruit at the table. Today was Daniel's turn. This same person is in charge of giving what's left to the donkey.” (Emma, teacher)

Another daily practice that encouraged to care for others in this school is taking a meaningful role in games and contributing to them by suggesting ideas, rules, and props, as well as taking care they are followed and used in the agreed way. The reason the students contributed to rules in games – and many other social situations too – seemed to be fundamentally the possibility to, first of all, stand for oneself, secondly, to express one's boundaries related to how one wishes to be treated, and thirdly, to respect the requests and boundaries of others. This is a great practice of caring for others. One must first understand how their behaviour influenced the other and then take the feelings and needs of the other(s) into account in the future. Often after a conflict between the children, Emma guided them towards setting a rule or finding a way to restore a broken

rule. In her discussion on moral education, Noddings (2013) reflects the meaning and reason behind rules, and why one should obey them. She argues that rather than punishing, it is important that the child understand why they are asked to follow a rule. I believe that by letting the children create rules, Emma showed them that they have an impact on the way that community works, they are respected and that rules are followed in order to make our lives more wonderful.

When helping to prepare the material and props for an activity, the children contribute to the creation of the social space they are about to enter. In order to be able to play, they must create the space together as a team, like the children who took the painted boards outside to create a pirate ship in FIGURE 5.



FIGURE 5. Children collaborate in preparing a game

In addition to care-centred routines, opportunities to care for others occurred naturally in child-led activities. Children often created their own game or a chain of games starting from a shared interest, which included different roles. On one of the forest school days, some children found mineral stones from a stone wall surrounding a field. Some started to clean them while others were thinking about how much money they could get selling them. They were calculating different prices and how much each child would get. This is a great practice of social skills, sharing materials and negotiating.

“Today I liked... there was an emotional moment today with the stones, that the work was distributed by them, alone. “I take this, I do the other and I don’t know what”. And I don’t want to interrupt anything there, it seems marvellous to me.” (Emma, teacher)

One must listen to others, express one’s own needs and adjust one’s own actions to the feelings and needs of others, which is fundamentally caring for others (Noddings 2013) and a good practice of non-violent communication (Rosenberg 2010). Emma acknowledged the importance of these moments and stressed that when the distribution of roles is smooth, she does not intervene. Sometimes however, Emma explained that an adult intervenes or might encourage the children to evaluate their games and distribution of roles in the circle of fire at the end of the day, or even during the activity if needed.

“Well, when it comes up to distribute the roles, I sometimes intervene, and say “It can’t always be the same person that does the same thing.” So at the end of the day when things like this happen, today for example there was no time, but we like to ask how the game went, to make an evaluation about how the day went and if there are little things that we [teachers] would like to change.” (Emma, teacher)

6 CARE FOR NATURE

One can learn to enjoy nature and feel more connected to it. Caring attitudes towards nature can also be learned through experiences and examples from others. The development of these aspects can be encouraged in a school setting. This chapter focuses on practices that encourage to care for the environment, the ways a pedagogical forest environment benefits learners, and finally, asks why caring for nature matters.

6.1 Children as creators and carers of their environments

In the studied school, the community enabled the children see how their actions are linked with the non-human world. Food residues were given back to nature: I was advised by the children that nutshells go under the mandarin trees and fruit peels to the donkey or the rooster. On my final field day, we planted the sprouted seeds that the children had prepared for germination earlier in the autumn. Emma explained them how they will plant the seedlings into the ground as summer comes and the seedlings have grown strong enough to survive in the wild. Here she describes how the presence of natural elements and animals helps in conveying the message of ecological responsibility.

“So it’s like there are many messages sent. One is the ecological responsibility, to care and not waste food, but that everything can be used. And in other spaces you don’t see this, because it... I mean in a house, if you don’t have a dog, a cat, that doesn’t eat leftovers, you throw them away. Here I like it that the things are given to the donkey or the trees, because the cuttings of the nut shells, we throw them away, we throw them to the trees, and sometimes we throw it in the fire. So this idea goes for the elements, for the fire, it goes for the living beings, for the trees, right?” (Emma, teacher)

The children in the school were not only working on their caring relations with their natural environment but also with the human-built one. They had responsibilities to take care of the building. Everyone had to collaborate in chores like washing dishes, setting the table, dusting, vacuuming, or wiping the lunch

table, and respect the property of the school by not breaking its materials, no matter the age. White, DeBoer and Scharf (2019) show that performing these chores could help develop self-competence, prosocial behaviour and self-efficacy – qualities that support the child’s holistic growth. In the picture below, the youngest child washes dishes after a snack (FIGURE 6).



FIGURE 6. A young student washing the dishes

Emma also stressed that it is good to do things that one does not like and learn to handle the frustration. Having to collaborate in the building or at the maintenance of the environment helps the children move from ethical care – the “I ought” – towards natural care – “I must” –, as Noddings (2013) would phrase it. Emma talks about the way Silvia and she want to transform the idea of cleaning being a feminine and negative task towards an idea of taking care of one’s space.

“Another thing is to clean. It’s important to clean up. It’s annoying as well to remind about it. I’m talking for myself. I come from a culture where cleaning is for women and cleaning is something negative. And we want to transform this. Cleaning is done by any person be it tiny be it big, everyone at their own level. The vacuum cleaner for example is only for those older than 6 years. It’s a big machine. But they can do the rest, and this is taking care of their space.” (Emma, teacher)

The children also collaborated in the creation and reparation of the school environment by carrying stones for a stone path, not stepping on the watering

system of the plants as reminded by the landowner, and even building their own sandpit in the school yard (FIGURE 7). The sandpit provides a new learning environment with broad possibilities to sensory experiences and connecting with the earth and water as the sun shines on the explorers.



FIGURE 7. A child playing in a sandpit built by the children

Covering the sandpit is another collaborative task that a couple of children have to do together at the end of every day. This seems like a message of continuity: when we create something, we must also maintain it. Similar chain was visible with the planted seeds: after sprouting them, we sow them into the soil and will keep watering and taking care of them later on. Collaborating in the care of the school's environment seemed more like ethical caring than natural caring (Noddings 2013): the caring came from a sense of duty rather than desire. Perhaps in some cases the caring became more natural, as Noddings would call it, and even if it did not, both qualities are equally acceptable and none of them is better than the other as even ethical care is dependent on natural care (Noddings 2013). All these tasks and opportunities to collaborate in their environment shows them not only that it is important to take care of the physical space, but also to understand their potential in co-creating it, as Emma puts it:

“And the sandpit, they made it themselves, digging. -- It's something that... that... is creating your space. -- and I like it that they see that [the house] is under renovation (laughs). -- Today is the first day that this [scaffolding] is

here. Because it's as if we create our spaces and that we can *create* it. And that the world can be disastrous like it is, but the message is that we are creators (uses both masculine and feminine forms in Spanish) of the community and of our lives. And this is what outdoors gives you." (Emma, teacher)

6.2 *Pedagogical forest environment provides unique opportunities*

Two out of four field days were forest school days, which meant spending the whole day outside using the pedagogical forest environment in diverse ways. In the school, there is a forest school day once every two weeks, which gives an opportunity for the children to explore nature and learn to be outdoors. Additionally, they spend approximately half of their school day outside in the pedagogical forest environment, which offers them opportunities to explore and marvel nature's phenomena as they play (Parikka-Nihti & Suomela 2017, Chapter 1).

Emma named many aspects that she considers beneficial when it comes to taking the school activities and to playing outdoors. She emphasized direct contact with the four elements – water, air, fire (sunlight), and earth – as well as the opportunity for the children to gather sensory and first-hand experiences that can later be referred to as their learning goes from concrete to more abstract levels of knowledge.

"It offers me sunlight -- and all that one learns through the connection of earth and water." (Emma)

"And surely there are more things. But yes, most of all the contact with the four elements, earth, the warmth of the sun, air and water. And all that it gives you to touch." (Emma, teacher)

"For me it's important that they play with the water, that they create a river. It hurt me to say to Daniel: "You have to set the table," because he was so fascinated to see how the water fell. And for me that's a lot of learning there, the gravity, how the things move, how they work, everything through a direct experience with their environment. Another person could say: "Aah the children are there with the stones" and more. They were looking at the strata. Enzo came to me and said: "Look how many stripes!" and I told him: "These are the strata". So they hear a word. In my pedagogical approach it's not so much... when something arises, knowledge arises too. And the idea is that in primary school they have a lot, a lot of experiences so as to integrate them in secondary school. Right? Like the primary school, kindergarten and primary school is a moment of "input" (in English) of having experiences, and later comes secondary school and you see a picture with the strata of a

stone, and you say: “When I was small, I played with this, I have touched this, tasted it, I know how it smells”” (Emma, teacher)

Hakkarainen (2018) describes a similar strategy with her students, 11 to 12 years of age, in a Finnish primary school. For years, the class has had forest school days one to four times a month. According to her, the pedagogical forest environment gives an opportunity to experience in a concrete way abstract concepts, like how big a hectare actually is. Hakkarainen stresses the importance of addressing the topics that emerged in outdoor learning in the classroom, either by discussing them, developing the topic forward, or writing about the experience in a learning diary.

The experience with water and sand was a great example of the way playing with natural elements feeds the curiosity of the children and offers them moments of wonder. I observed one student playing in the sand pit. She was digging a hole and went to take some water to fill it. After that she wondered aloud where the water went as only traces of water were left on the sides of the hole. Sand can be used for a myriad of things that support the learning of various skills, as Emma articulates:

“Touching. Eh... all the little stones, when they need to pick small things, all this is psychomotor learning that *normally* in the traditional way, is done with worksheets, and here you can do it outdoors with the sandpit, for example. Then, with the stones, cleaning them... Oliver, I saw one moment.” (Emma, teacher)

Emma had also observed how being outdoors influences the concentration of the children. This is in line with the growing body of literature that suggests that open-ended nature experiences can restore children’s attention, following the attention restoration theory presented earlier (Schutte et al. 2017). This kind of moments occurred with children who were playing for example with water and gravity, sand, and water, or climbing a tree.

“And for me the concentration, putting one’s focus on an activity and being completely focussed on it. I see a lot of children that focus, concentrate on something, and this is what it gives, for me, to be outdoors. It can also happen indoors.” (Emma, teacher)

Coming from the house to the yard after an intensive morning indoors showed me the impact of learning outdoors concretely. Getting out of the house felt indeed restorative – the silence, the fresh air, and the open space had an instant

effect on me. Emma articulated this further: she sees the impact of nature in the calmness of the children, and possibly even of herself because she uses the plural personal pronoun, *we*, as she says that they are calmer or can “connect with calmness” when they are outside. Not having tight schedules for breaks allows a nice flow of learning but being outdoors seemed to make the flow more pleasant and less tiring.

The variation of open spaces and smaller nooks enables taking distance from other children and thus practicing how to respect the boundaries of oneself and the others. Situations where a child wanted to be alone, or a group of children wanted to play together without others were great examples of how the children act based on their needs and take advantage of the diversity of spaces in the pedagogical forest environment. As discussed earlier, the children were encouraged to express these needs with assertion, and the pedagogical forest environment supported this development.

Another benefit that Emma distinguished was the element of surprise when spending moments of learning outdoors. Many unexpected things can happen, appear, or move us: the environment offers unlimited opportunities for exploration, animals or insects may surprise us, the weather changes during the day and catches our attention. Emma outlines some of the benefits she relates to the element of surprise in nature:

“It seems to me that all the inputs, the sounds of birds, of wind, right? That happen all of a sudden. The kind of things happen that something indoors doesn't offer you. It also seems like... being able to distinguish what's natural and what's artificial, like the activity that we did at the beginning of the day. This also develops observation. There's a boy who saw a mouse and came running and said: “I saw a mouse that went home”. This is also what it gives you to be outdoors, to be in contact with the fauna and the flora.” (Emma, teacher)

This passage also shows the children's curiosity towards animals. There were many moments in my observation days when we stopped to marvel at an insect, snail, or the donkey. The curiosity turned into care for animals. When someone found an immense centipede while looking for interesting plants and animals from the soil, the children were amazed by it, perhaps a bit scared too. They wanted to see it, know its name, and find out more information about it. They called others excitedly to see the centipede and some children gathered around to respectfully

marvel at it (FIGURE 8). Daniel wanted to feed the chicken and decided to give them mandarins straight from the tree. He then learned that chickens do not eat mandarins and that usually we give the leftovers of our food to the animals, not the fruit straight from the tree.



FIGURE 8. Children marvelling at a centipede

Learning to observe one's environment with open eyes and ears – where the path goes, how an insect crawls on the ground, how the wind moves the leaves, or how the birds sing – is also a skill, as Emma outlined earlier. Distinguishing natural elements and objects from man-made ones is also part of the cognitive input that learning outdoors gives. It is natural for a child to observe their environment and care for it, and the pedagogical forest environment gives them an opportunity to channel their inner tendencies (Parikka-Nihti & Suomela 2017, Chapter 5).

6.3 *Connection with nature as a personal journey and a societal change-maker*

There was an accepting atmosphere that Emma and Silvia strove to maintain. This openness reached the relations children had with nature and the ways in which they connected with nature in their play and other activities. When Enzo

suggested Emma the bird trap described earlier in chapter 4.3, she did not judge his desire to capture and possibly kill birds. She did say that she does not want to make one because she is a vegetarian, but she let the children plan their traps and helped them in their endeavour. Noddings agrees that even when people do not share the same will to care for something, it is important to maintain the caring relation between people and simply receive what they share:

“It may well be that you care deeply for some plant, animal, or environment in which I have no interest. My carelessness may shock and offend you. Now my obligation as one-caring is to listen, to receive you in all your indignation. I do not give way because of political pressure and the might of your lobbying, but I listen carefully because you address me. What matters to you is of interest and concern to me. We do not draw the line of principle, choose sides, and confront each other across it. Rather, we receive each other, we allow ourselves to feel what the other feels, and then we reason together. “All this is of variable importance, but you still matter more.”” (Noddings 2013, 150)

This describes what I observed in Emma’s attitudes. We are different, we care for different things, and yet those do not define whether we are worth being cared-for as an individual or as a part of the community. Emma let the children explore their own relation with their environments and did not judge them based on her own views.

The children engaged with nature in many different ways, both caring and not caring for animals and plants. The same child could collect a bag full of grass for his guineapigs and then plan a trap for birds. Another child would feed the donkey and later strangle the dog with rough hands as he was petting the dog. This is normal considering the age of the children as caring relations with plants and animals develop over time and through building a relation with them (Noddings 2013).

I observed an interesting behaviour related to natural elements and their value in the eyes of some children. Before the final circle of my third day, they seemed to be imitating Emma or some other child and talking how the tree is a living being and we must not do harm for it or its leaves. They were saying this with ridicule in their voices. Emma overheard a part of the conversation and said that if they were imitating some adult (knowing it was her), it was funny, but if they were imitating a child from the group, they must know that being imitated by others may disturb someone. In the same circle, Lucas was telling Luis and Oliver

not to destroy the leaves on the ground. This ridicule made me wonder what the children, who were part of it, actually think about what they were saying, what kind of nature relationship they have, and also, how does the attitude environment of the group impact their connectedness to nature. However, one of the children, who was particularly loud with the imitation, had only joined the school a few months ago, and this made me think whether he was testing the general attitude environment about caring for nature and adults' reactions to this testing; he was looking at me and Silvia many times when shouting his "don't hurt the tree" - imitation.

Knowing that the habits and opinions of others, and the whole social and cultural environment of an individual, influences their own ones (Reunamo & Suomela 2013; Olli et al. 2013), it may well be that he was trying to understand his new social and cultural environment and its differences to the ones he is used to. Some children disagreed strongly with Lucas about the leaves, and this "to care or not to care" debate grew into the conflict discussed in chapter 5.1. This situation also showed how the children actively work on their relationship with the pedagogy and the nature relationship it offers instead of simply taking what the social environment around them suggests.

Emma referred to connection in many areas: connecting with one's inner world, connecting with others and connecting with nature. Because she sees nature as a part of us, her pedagogic approach encourages children to connect with their inner and outer nature. Emma's own relationship with nature seems strong, and she has a clear vision about us as part of nature. I did not observe this much in her communication with the children, and she clarified that it is more like an implicit aspect that is not so visible to the children but that she stays mindful of. Connection seemed to be part of the core of the pedagogical approach, and Emma described its more spiritual dimensions when asked what the world would look like if all schools were like theirs:

"Wow. Well, I imagine that the schools will keep transforming, that there will come gardens, the children go out in the nature. If they're in their cities, they go to the park. And they start to realise that I'm the earth. And that every time the concept of "I" changes. And there's a bigger "I" which is that when I hurt the earth, I'm hurting myself. When I hurt a river, I hurt myself. -- Because when I'm conscious and I have a direct experience with nature, I feel this kind of bond, like the villages of Native Americans or other villages that live more in contact, more in connection with the earth. -- They don't talk about

the earth as something that can be exploited, sold, abused. But instead, they talk about a mother, or about a being that they are themselves. There are also people who, when they draw themselves, they draw the landscape. Right? Like experiments done with children that are... that live more in connection, their "I" is also their environment. So I imagine, that this [way of schooling] can help to grow the idea that we are the same being, the same organism, and that we are like the neurons of a planet and that we are the consciousness of that planet, that we are one being." (Emma, teacher)

Emma's words echo ecopsychologist Roszak's (1995) words: "If the self is expanded to include the natural world, behaviour leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self-destruction". The idea of connecting to nature as a preventing procedure to harming it has been proven in academic literature (e.g., Mayer and Frantz 2014). As Noddings (2013, 147) and other care theorists and researchers suggest, creating a relation with plants and animals helps to promote caring behaviours towards them: when I learn about the life of a spider and its effort in building its net, I am more likely to respect other spiders too. This, according to Noddings (ibid.), creates an obligation to care, and when this obligation is based on a caring relation, one cannot ignore it. She argues that once we then expand the circle of caring of our own and those under our influence, caring for plants and animals starts to shift.

Could this change of our connection to nature impact the whole society and the way it functions? We know that the current neo-liberal economy does not support the regeneration that our planet requires, and we also know that education is strongly political (Värri 2018). Change is being called for, and education is a potential place to start because it is part of the reason why cycles of damage keep repeating themselves (Värri 2018). According to Emma, a pedagogy that focuses on connection and care could make people aware of their impact on themselves and world, the way we relate to ourselves and others, and thus have an impact at a societal, political, economic, and educational level.

Linda: And what effect would this [transformation] have [on the society]?

Emma: Well, a society that seems to me being more conscious of the impact, of how we impact with our words, with our actions, with our way of working, with the way we move, with what we want to do with our lives. How we design our life in order not to reproduce cycles of damage, terror, war... eh... of pain. -- I think it can help generate another paradigm where there are societies where they respect nature like I respect my hand, or I respect my body, like a part... more. Not seeing it as something separate. So it would affect the economy, the politics, education of course. At the level of relating, like how I

relate. I mean, at the individual, relational, and group levels. Like this. This is how I believe it can affect. That's why I think it's important. (Emma, teacher)

Perhaps, by looking at what children care for (Bartos 2012) and encouraging them to expand their caring relations (Noddings 2013), children would engage with the world differently than the generations before them, some even engage in pro-environmental action after establishing these caring relations (e.g., Mayer et al. 2009). They would then be likely to transmit these caring attitudes and values to their social environment of adults and children, their own children, and grandchildren too, which helps others expand their caring relations. This could, indeed, create a positive cycle that, over time, influences the way we as humanity engage in politics, economy, and education as Emma reasoned.

7 DISCUSSION

This section binds together the empirical findings of this study, the theoretical framework combined with other relevant literature, and my conclusions, focusing on the research problem that asked how the aspects of care (for oneself, the others and the environment) are present in nature-based emotional education of a Spanish alternative school. Conclusions are followed by implications on how a caring pedagogy could serve the field of education now and in the future, what parts of it could be implemented in Finnish primary schools, and where this process could start.

7.1 Structures that encourage caring

The first research question focuses on structures pivotal to the accomplishment of three-dimensional care in nature-based emotional education. The analysis has shown that, firstly, the studied community worked hard on communication and had built a daily structure that encouraged safe communication consistently throughout the day. Circle time in the morning and at the end of the day was a safe place for the children and teachers to discuss daily topics, but also to give an importance to solving some difficult situations or addressing themes that had come up. In addition to these circles of fire, the teachers used 'mini-circles' to solve conflicts between the children or between adults and children. In the circles, children were practicing how to listen to others, not making judgemental expressions to what others say, and giving others the turn to speak, which are aligned with Noddings's (2012, 2013) idea of caring. As a way to care for themselves, the children were also practicing how to express their feelings and needs to others, which is encouraged by both Noddings and Rosenberg (2010).

The teacher was supporting the inner work of her students with her calm presence, by validating their emotions, and by asking what happened, what they need and how they feel, which resembles the model of non-violent

communication created by Rosenberg (2010). She also modelled the children (Carter 2016), how they can express their feelings and needs, and make requests based on that. Rosenberg's non-violent communication (2010, 6–7) follows the same pattern and has been proven efficient in different conflicts, mild and severe. The process of non-violent communication has four components, and the pattern that Emma followed resembled it. She first asked what happened or told what they had *observed* and asked the children to verbalize what they *feel*. She empathised with them and validated their feelings with her reactions and sounds. She let the children argue a bit if needed and then gently guided them to tell what they would *need*, whether it is a different way of playing, more space, or something else than a dog to squeeze. Then she asked what *requests* each party had for the other(s), be it a rule, an apology, kind words or some help. After agreeing that a rule is needed, the children talked about it and came up with rules like not to hit or push in football, or not to throw leaves.

This process also helps to promote a culture where children learn to express their needs, and the teacher learns to listen to the expressed, not assumed needs of her students (Noddings 2012). Overall, these circles, were they big or small in size or severity, they were gathered consistently, and always only finished when the matters had been clarified. The goal was not always to end up being close friends, as Emma expressed, but to create a relation between the differences. Likewise, maintaining the caring relation between the carer and the cared-for is indeed what Noddings (2012) emphasizes as the most important.

It is important to acknowledge the quality of caring the teacher emits to her students in this particular school. Instead of forcing them to do something they do not wish to do, she connects with them first and then shows them why it would be important to try the activity on hand or asks them to express their needs clearly. Moreover, by consistently stopping to solve conflicts, she showed to the children that the feelings and needs they express matter. Noddings (2012) talks about this relation as the quality that separates caring from a virtue-caring attitude that aims to fulfil the assumed, not expressed needs of the student. She says:

“Today, in some of our communities, many students may be in need of such dialogue, yet there are pressures to ‘teach the subject’, and there is a danger of a relational carer giving up and settling for a virtue-caring attitude.” (Noddings 2012).

By this, Noddings (ibid.) does not mean the assumed needs such as curriculum would or should be ignored, but rather that the expressed needs are taken care of first before addressing the assumed ones.

The second structure I observed to encourage caring in this school were the chores that were rotated between all the children. The children contributed to creating and maintaining the physical space, both built and natural. This enables them to develop caring relations to their environment (see e.g., Noddings 2013) and understand the impact of their actions, as Emma argued, which in turn may influence their behaviour in relation to the environment (Mayer et al. 2009).

Thirdly, the school days and their structures offered the children a variety of roles that they could take and use to practice caring for others through receiving the other(s), adapting their actions to the requests of others, and solve problems together with or without the teacher. They practiced these skills in both roles given by the teachers (chores, games, workshops) and in roles created and decided in child-led games and activities. The teacher may have intervened sometimes, but often she would observe from a distance and see how the children appoint the roles and collaborate in them with each other. These roles not only encourage to care for others through the model that they can observe from others and the experience they get as they practice, but it also encourages them to express and defend themselves, which are essential skills for one's social-emotional wellbeing.

7.2 Competences and atmospheres that encourage caring

In addition to structures that frame daily practices, there were some competences and atmospheres that encouraged developing caring attitudes to the self, others or the environment. Expressing oneself with assertion, acting with responsibility, and respecting oneself and others seem to be competences that encourage caring for the self and others. An important part of teaching those skills as a part of nature-based emotional education is to model the children how to recognise, express, and validate their own feelings and needs, and those of others. Moreover, the children need guidance in the processes of understanding and solving difficult emotions and the actions that they provoke in them. All these skills

are aligned with Avola and Pentikäinen's (2019, 148) list of most important emotional skills.

Learning to recognise and validate feelings in oneself and others is the foundation of staying away from judging others by their appearance, behaviour or other aspects that can be seen on the surface. There was no tolerance for judging others verbally or non-verbally in the studied school, which was made clear by consistently addressing situations she considered problematic in that sense. Judging others would not only hurt them but also go against the three principles of emotional education: safety, compassion and strengthening the good (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019). An emotionally safe atmosphere can be built through respect to one another, and the result can be seen in the way the children share personal things with the teacher and in circles where they feel safe. The children need to be seen from a place of empathy and understanding by the teacher. As discussed earlier, this kind of atmosphere promotes a sense of belonging and thus social-emotional well-being and learning outcomes (eg. Kyrö-Ämmälä & Arminen 2020).

Not judging others is also related to respecting others and respecting the different opinions, qualities, and personalities we have. Understanding the underlying reasons of words and behaviours is vital when a person is navigating the wild sea of emotions and prevents unnecessary judgement between people. As Noddings (2012) puts it: "It is this capacity to be moved by the affective condition of the other that teachers try to develop in students as part of their moral education". Afterall, caring for others is receiving them as they are and adapting our behaviour towards one that makes life easier and more wonderful for us both (Noddings 2013, Rosenberg 2010).

Being able to solve conflicts requires a strong culture of reconciliation. Instead of punishments, the teachers were committed to face the children, talk with them, show their interest by asking and listening, and complimenting and thanking them when possible, which is the model Avola and Pentikäinen (2019, 241) also suggest. They stress that a culture of reconciliation requires social-emotional skills from everyone, so as the teacher models the former pattern, the children learn to use it themselves. I agree with Avola and Pentikäinen (ibid. 239) that the skill of reconciliation ought to be acknowledged as one of the most important skills to learn, so that we would learn that conflicts are a part of life and

that solving them makes us feel better. By validating the differences in each other, the children may learn to respect each other, and when they have tools to solve conflicts and are surrounded by a culture of reconciliation, there is no room for bullying behaviours. Perhaps, having seen how we can go from conflict to reconciliation, children can possibly understand that working on the current challenges between humans and the non-human world can eventually lead to a reconciliation and a healing planet.

There was a lot of freedom in this school, but the children were also given a lot of responsibility. They were practicing how to take responsibility of their learning, actions, body, and role in the community. They were, of course, supported by the teachers according to their age and competences, but no one was too small to take responsibility of themselves in some way. By practicing these smaller and bigger responsibilities, Emma concluded that the children would learn to understand the impact of their actions to others and their own environments. She seemed to want to empower the children to see that they have both the freedom and responsibility to create and maintain their world. This would be a great message of hope to children and youth who experience anxiety due to the climate crisis (see e.g., Pihkala 2020)

7.3 Pedagogical forest environment, social-emotional skills, and caring

The pedagogical forest environment surrounding the school provided rich learning opportunities to the children in many areas of life. Not only did it offer a playground to learn in, about and for the environment (see e.g., Parikka-Nihti & Suomela 2017, Chapter 1) but it also encouraged the children to engage with it in a caring way, which may later impact their pro-environmental action (Lumber et al. 2017; Mayer & Frantz 2004), as discussed earlier. Thanks to the direct experiences with the four elements, plants, and animals, the children had opportunities to build emotional connections with their environment and its living beings.

Learning outdoors in the pedagogical forest environment also provokes many feelings: wonder, awe, curiosity and surprise are accompanied by frustration, fear, and anger to name a few. These feelings are excellent

opportunities to practice social-emotional skills and help others do the same. Naming new plants, animals, and natural phenomena creates opportunities to develop one's language skills (Hanscom 2016). The teacher's role is to help the students name these new elements, recognise feelings in themselves and others, and manage harder situations and emotions. However, the outdoors also offers a counter-effect to all these stimuli: the calming effects of leaning outdoors described by Emma are supported by the attention restoration theory that Schutte and others (2017) used to show how children performed better in attention requiring tasks after a nature walk. Overall, one could make the conclusion that what we do indoors can be done outdoors, and often with more variation, ease, and benefits.

The pedagogical forest environment allows children's explorations and games take place in different nooks and open spaces around the school yard. This creates opportunities to practice social skills, which helps the students get to know each other and make the atmosphere of the school warmer and more accepting. The integration of pedagogical forest environments to Finnish primary schools could thus help lower the high rates of bullying in Finland (see e.g., Junttila 2010), especially when combined with an approach focused on socio-emotional competences that has been proven to prevent bullying behaviours (Knowler & Frederickson 2013).

Learning in the pedagogical forest environment supported the development of the assertion of the children and gave them opportunities to take action based on their opinions and needs. When a child is finding their own ways to regulate negative emotions (Avola & Pentikäinen 2019, 159), learning to take space for oneself in nature – taking advantage of its restoring effects (e.g., Schutte et al. 2017) – and to express the need to others with assertion, can be helpful. Indoor learning environments do not always have room for children to calm down in a quieter and calming environment.

Being surrounded by natural elements gave an opportunity for the children to test and challenge the nature relationship offered by the pedagogy. The students often looked at the adults in situations where the ideas of the main teacher were challenged by a student or students: how plants and animals ought to be treated, and what is wrong or right. This showed an interesting power relation in the community and made me wonder how teachers with a strong

nature relationship could create an environment that is open for finding one's own relationship – and how teachers could address those nature relationships that seem to be turning into harming behaviours towards nature without imposing their own beliefs on the child too strongly. Emotional connections with animals are important in creating and expanding caring relations towards nature, which can help children develop ethical caring (“I ought”) towards a more natural caring (“I must”) (Noddings 2013) without the teacher needing to intervene that much. This could perhaps offer a starting point for the reflection.

These findings related to how children shape their views on and relationship with nature were interesting. Is it the pedagogical approach, the pedagogical forest environment, or the combination of the two that creates this opportunity? What kind of physical and social environment do children need in order to feel supported and encouraged to actively shape their own ways of being, doing, and thinking? I believe the pedagogical forest environment plays an important role in this since it offers constant stimuli for these reflections in the children. However, if the pedagogy did not focus on nature relationship or nature connectedness, these reflections could perhaps be left unaddressed by the teachers.

7.4 The potential of nature-based caring pedagogy

The fourth research question that I set to this study is quite ambitious. Recognising the potential of a nature-based caring pedagogy in the context of Finnish primary school pedagogies still requires sophisticated guesses based on academic literature that explores either environmental education, emotional education, care in education, or a combination of some of them. Based on this study, I conclude that personal experiences with nature helps to create a connection with it and feeling part of it, which in turn changes the way one cares for it and helps one to expand their caring relations for nature. One could then contemplate whether this expansion could influence the perspective of different fields of decision-making at a societal level, like Emma proposed. A change of perspective could also take place when children, who are the future policymakers and citizens with the power to make changes, learn tools to achieve and maintain an emotional balance alongside with strong and caring communication skills.

People with compassion to the self and others, not to mention the environment, could then help others develop the same skills and attitudes in themselves.

Adding caring for nature and humans in the equation combines emotional and environmental education seamlessly into an intertwined circle. Based on Emma's reasoning, we are the creators and maintainers of our emotional, social and physical environments. This can be both an empowering and frightening revelation to a child. Especially when it comes to ecological emotions or eco-anxiety, Pihkala (2020) suggests that teachers ought to do a strong inner work and self-reflection to be able to accompany the child. Based on an extensive literature review, Pihkala (2020) suggests offering chances to discuss emotions and validating ecological emotions and eco-anxiety as some of the ways educators can take into practice. Including the practice of emotional skills and self-reflection could thus help students who experience difficult ecological emotions (ibid.). Acknowledging eco-anxiety and ecological emotions and helping people to cope with them and despite them is important, which is why Pihkala calls for perspectives from (environmental) psychology and prosocial studies to be made part of environmental education.

Caring for nature is essential so as to act for the survival of the human race, and education is a potent tool for changes at the metaphysical level (Värri 2018). Bartos (2012), following Tronto (1993), also emphasises the value of people's caring actions in the making of political outcomes because in a society with caring, people take relationships, mutuality and respect seriously. Tronto (ibid. 124) even suggests that care and caring "offers the greatest possibility for transforming social and political thinking". One cannot say it better than Bartos (2012, 160): "A variety of political outcomes can result from people's caring actions including a fundamental shift in our social and political worlds when people work together for a collective ideal or incorporate these ideals into formal political decision-making."

So, to answer the fourth research question, I suggest that the potential of nature-based caring education is indeed in its *combination* of these intertwined approaches that support and complement each other in various ways, resulting in an approach that may be theoretically complex but rather seamless in practice. However, where this pedagogy could take the Finnish primary school pedagogy, and the society, is still unknown, but it is, as reasoned above, rather certainly

going to impact the society in some way. What we know from studies is that the benefits for individuals and communities would be a combination of the benefits of all three aspects – reaching our wellbeing, learning, social relations, and the way we treat our environments and the environment at large.

7.5 Conclusions and further implications

The results of this case study suggest that the aspects of care distinguished by Noddings (2013) can be integrated in the practices of nature-based caring pedagogy with a focus on social-emotional development. In FIGURE 9, I show how the findings contribute to pertinent scholarly work.

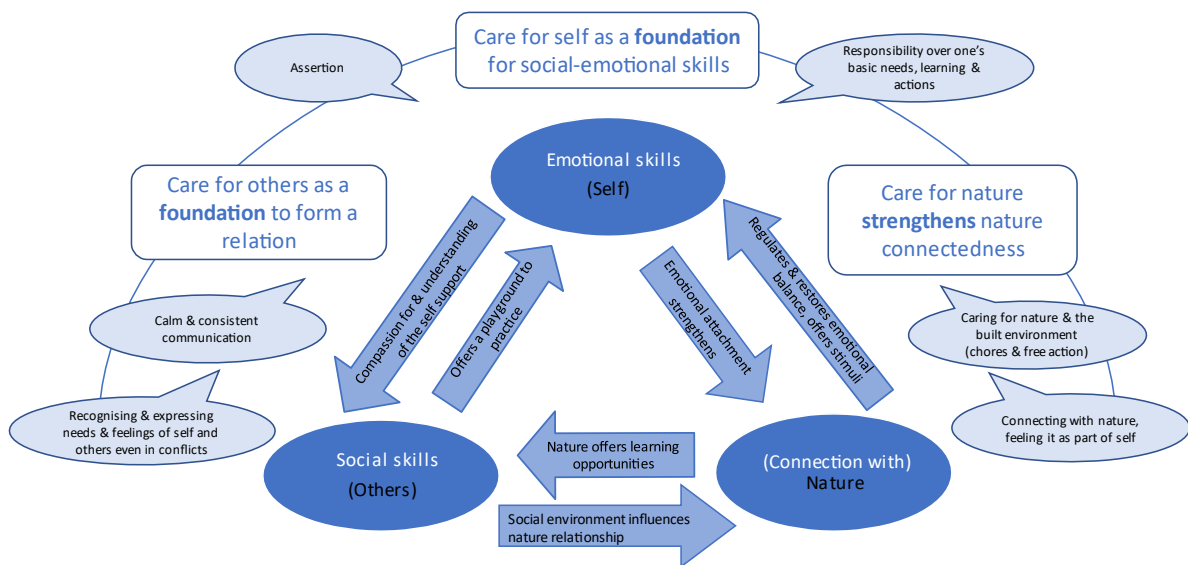


FIGURE 9. Illustration of nature-based emotional education and care

My study suggests that caring for the self contributes to creating the foundation for social-emotional skills and was characterised as assertion and responsibility over one’s basic needs, learning and actions. Caring for others forms the relation within which children can practice social skills with others. This care for others was most visible in the calm and consistent communication the students were encouraged to use and recognising and expressing the needs and feelings of self and others in calmer situations as well as conflicts. Care for nature has a

strengthening function on one's connection with nature, and this care for nature as well as the human-built environment was present in chores, games, and child-led activities. The idea of connecting with nature and feeling it as part of self also reflected caring attitudes in the conversations of the teacher, which is a great base for the development of the respective attitudes of the children she guides (Pihkala 2020). The arrows between emotional skills, social skills and connection with nature show the proven connections each of them has to one another, and illustrates their interconnectedness.

We are not only emotions, nor are we only our environment. We need to understand both since they are important and inseparable parts of our being. Care is what helps cultivate a healthy soil both for social-emotional well-being within communities, and for the health of the non-human world. Therefore, I conclude that focusing on activities and practices that encourage caring for the self, others and nature is fundamental in modern education with social-emotional and environmental threats. Hence nature-based emotional education with an emphasis on caring supports the learning of social-emotional skills and the development of connection with nature.

Before making suggestions on further research, I reflect upon the case study. The research methods were carefully chosen and served the purpose of the study. Content analysis gave me an opportunity to look at each aspect of care individually and form themes that were repeated or emphasised in the interviews or observations. The relationship between the interviews and my field observations was successful and the interviews opened another level of reflection to the observations I made. I found the interviews successful with regard to my research questions, the three aspects of care, and the societal impacts of caring pedagogy. The data of this study provided me with an in-depth dive to one case, which gave me a chance to understand how the theories and themes discussed in academic literature can be used in practice.

My understanding of both the academic literature and the selected school developed over the observation period, which is a natural element of qualitative research (Kiviniemi 2018). I expected the care-encouraging methods to focus more on practices but noticed that the atmospheres and communication were more central. The purpose was to see one example of nature-based emotional education that could then provide a starting point for further research exploring

the practices, structures and attitudes that support holistic child development. I consider that this study gave me the information I was looking for, and a good starting point for further research.

The body of literature used in this study did not present a clear term to define the outdoor playscape that has elements of forests but is not necessarily a forest, nor a human-built or empty playground. I have presented the term 'pedagogical forest environment', which on one hand is a rather complex but on the other hand a thematically clear learning environment. Pedagogical forest environment brings together the descriptions of an outdoor learning environment used in schools of ecosocial caring, and it can easily be used in research focused on environmental education in schools.

Finally, I want to draw some conclusions on what conventional schools in Finland and globally could learn from this study. One way to make Finnish primary schools and their pedagogies nature-based, emotionally aware, and caring could be bringing nature as a more integrated part of the school days, as well as learning to validate the children with their emotions and differences, as suggested by the teacher in the case study. This is aligned with studies presented earlier in this study and responds to the requirements the national core curriculum sets on Finnish basic education (FNBE 2016). Caring for others could also simply look like a shift in attitudes and learning new patterns to solve conflicts. Seeing conflicts as "a lever of evolution", as Emma put it, can impact the atmosphere of the community positively.

Noddings (2012, 777) points out the fact that "Given the variety and legitimacy of the needs expressed by students, teachers should have unusually broad intellectual competence." Therefore, I call for more teacher training on learning and teaching social-emotional skills and non-violent communication. Teachers also need more ideas and training on how to integrate elements of nature into schools and classroom practices and why it matters. Programs combining environmental education with the fundamentals of emotional education are necessary not only for supporting the development of children's nature relationships but also for gaining tools to support children and youth who struggle with hard ecological emotions (see e.g., Pihkala 2020).

The use of the term pedagogical forest environment may help future research by creating more coherence instead of the various terms currently used

in different fields of research. Future research could also be conducted precisely on the combination of emotional education, environmental education and caring in educational settings to clarify how it looks like, and how it could be repeated in not only alternative schools but also in conventional institutions of education globally in order to contribute to the wellbeing of nature – that we are a part of.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Information letter to parents of the study school

Dear families of Petites Flames,

I am a 5th year primary school teacher student from Tampere University (Finland). I am currently working on my master's thesis related to nature-based emotional education. In my thesis, I focus on the pedagogical practices of the teachers, and the benefits nature-based emotional education might have on individuals and the community.

I am grateful to your coordinator, who opened the doors of Petites Flames to me in order to conduct my data collection. I will collect the data through teacher interviews, and observations during the school days. I might also instruct a workshop or some workshops for the children. However, you will be informed about them beforehand and the children are free to participate if they wish.

The first observation day will take place on Monday 16 November from 9 am to 2 pm. There will be other observation days along the end of the autumn and beginning of spring term, depending on the progress of my study.

In order to remember what each participant said during the interviews or observations, I will voice record some moments. I might also take some pictures or videos but will not include anyone's face in the pictures or video unless they want. The possible videos help me see the body language of the participants, and things that I did not see in the event, because usually many things happen at the same time. All recorded material is only for my research purposes and will not be seen or heard by anyone else.

During the whole process of the thesis, I will make sure that the identity of any participant cannot be revealed and that, in the final study, any **thoughts or experiences cannot be associated to the identity of any participant**. Once the thesis has been approved and published, I will destroy all data related to the participants.

If you do not wish your child to participate in the study, please contact your coordinator. The children are free to stop participating in the study at any point of the observation period. If you have any questions regarding my thesis, please contact me via email: linda.linnaranta@tuni.fi. I speak both English and Spanish.

In case you are interested to hear about the project or read the final thesis later in the spring, I will be happy to tell you more. The final thesis will be freely accessible online.

Finally, I want to thank you for your trust. With this work, I aim to show that there are different alternatives to conventional schools. My dream is to open my own school one day, and yours is an inspiration to me.

Best regards,

Linda Linnaranta