

Unpacking “Child-Centered”

Reimagining Early Childhood Through African and Indigenous Lenses

by Rukia Monique Rogers

Before progress can be made on social issues like gender inequality and racism, work needs to be done to ensure the planet is sustainable enough for humans to even exist.

—Angela Davis

In re-imagining early childhood education and care, we have to re-imagine the world that we live in. This starts with a recognition of how the human family is beautifully intertwined with the natural world, which provides all the sustenance and life that we need. Do we believe that the resources that this earth has bestowed upon us, such as water and food, must be shared amongst the inhabitants in a manner that is equitable and just? If so, then

one vital role of education is to support young children’s innate connection to the natural world and to acquire ancient skills of respect and sustainability to protect and preserve this earth.

For as long as I can remember, the early childhood education community, with good intent, has promoted the importance of placing the child at the center of our work. However, this is problematic if we do not unpack what is suggested by this view. While we can learn a great deal from children and must show them profound respect, what do we see as the center of our work, the purpose of education? What ideas should this education be based on?

We must acknowledge that “child-centered” is steeped in Western culture of individualism, consumption, and capitalism. This cultural view of the child is often deficit based, and fails to recognize children’s innate capabilities. Educators, for example, are told to provide multiples of certain items

because young children are incapable of sharing. What idea about resources does this convey to children? Are they just to be individually protected or mindlessly consume? Do we believe that young children are more interested in material things than in forming relationships with each other?



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Children from birth have a deep yearning to be in a relationship with others and the world around them.



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Rukia Monique Rogers has worked with young children and their families for over 25 years, including work as a preschool and toddler teacher, a studio teacher, and a curriculum coordinator. In 2013, she founded

The Highlander School in Atlanta’s greater community, with a rich history to draw on. She is inspired by the educators of Reggio Emilia, by Bettina Love, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others who see education as a fundamental right, as well as a catalyst for social change. Rogers is an anti-bias and anti-racist educator committed to cultivating a community full of love.

Yes, we do not want our ECE programs to be adult-centered, but the term “child-centered” fails to look at our whole community.

Perhaps central to our duty as educators is to nurture a sense of responsibility toward all living things, human and non-human, so that children begin to see themselves as an important link in an interdependent ecological system. I would like to make the case for placing the natural world as the center of our work, recognizing that humans and Western culture have, for far too long, centered ourselves as the worthiest. We have developed a way of living on this planet centered on individualism and acquisition, with desires rooted in consumption and capitalism. On many fronts, our lives are guided by hierarchical thinking, with continuous actions of domination and conquest.

In both direct and obscure ways, most teaching approaches fail to acknowledge the integrated and interdependent relationship between the natural

world and humans. Our approach to curriculum and ways of being with children do not support their innate connection with the organic ecosystem, but, instead, give a false narrative of unlimited resources and disregard for the natural world. In our fast-paced, consumer-oriented world, we often disrupt young children’s affection for the natural world. If we slowed down to pay more attention to the children’s perspectives, we might see they have better instincts than we adults do about relating to the natural world.

Learning from Our Observations of Children

Watching children, we can see that from birth they have a deep yearning to be in a relationship with others and the world around them. They are highly perceptive, empathic souls who want to engage and be an integral part of their community.

At a recent retreat with educators at The Highlander School in Atlanta, we

studied collectively-gathered documentation of the children’s connection to, and thoughts about, the natural world. We recognized they observe, study, and appreciate the aesthetics and phenomena of nature with full engagement—the patterns of a leaf, the sounds of the wind, or the movement of an insect. They use the languages of drawing, mark making, storytelling and oral expression to convey their sense that community includes both humans and non-humans alike, and that animals and all living creations hold citizenships. For instance, as we explored the idea of “what citizenship means,” we heard the following comments.

Violet: Living creatures are citizens.

Harper: I am making some bears that are citizens.

Likewise, the children’s sense of justice and equity is expansive. A dominant and recurring thread in their thinking over the last couple of years is the notion that food from our garden (and

Nicole’s Voice: The Perspective of a Toddler Teacher

How do you view your work with young children with regards to supporting their innate connection to the natural world?

In my work with young children, one of my roles is to support the children’s natural curiosity for the natural world around them. They are instinctively drawn to the beauty of mother nature and will find wonder and joy in a pile of wood chips, inviting endless possibilities for exploration. My toddlers will notice the tiniest millipede crawling in the soil and every puddle on the playground. I have seen trike-riding toddlers come to a full stop to observe a bug they saw crawling across the bike track. They abandon their play to follow it through the grass as curious fingers and minds wonder aloud as to where it was going and if it wanted its mommy and daddy. Their innate curiosity reminds me to be in the moment. They challenge me to reflect on my own relationship with Mother Nature as we explore and learn together. Being a part of a nature-centered program, we wish to nurture our relationship with the natural world. Sustainable practices such as gardening, composting, and recycling have become part of the everyday life of our classroom. This provides opportunities to talk with the children about nature, the environment, and our role as citizens of this planet.

How do you work to foster a sustainable world?

In my work as an early childhood educator, I believe that it is important to implement sustainable practices into the everyday life of the program. In our classroom, gardening, composting, and recycling are incorporated into the everyday practices. The children help to tend the gardens, water the plants, and harvest the produce. They also collect kitchen scraps and leaves for our compost bins and paper and plastic to recycle.

in general) should be shared. One child said, “We have been sharing our garden with the caterpillar, that is love.”

They advocate that food should be especially shared with the members in our community experiencing homelessness, such as Mr. Cedric. They were so passionate about this subject that they wanted to write letters to Atlanta’s mayor to ask that she change laws that make the sharing of food difficult.

We find ourselves eager to learn with and learn from the children, and challenge our thinking about the natural world and food equity.

Strengthening Children for the World They Will Inherit

How can we approach our work with understandings and practices that acknowledge that this beautiful earth is in the midst of a terrible crisis? That the world that children will inherit may have scarce resources? I am

proposing that we reclaim African and Indigenous values that were misunderstood and almost destroyed by centuries of global imperialism and colonization.

In the African worldview, as in many Indigenous communities including Native Americans, land and the earth are imbued with spiritual energy that demands reverence and care. Land, plants, water, and animals cannot be owned by humans, as these entities have their own energy, feelings, and power. Although there is wide diversity within African and Indigenous cultures, this belief that earth and all of its gifts are to be revered as divine is pervasive.

I propose that as early childhood educators, we begin to examine and reflect upon how we might borrow from and reignite these ancient cultural practices, so that children deepen their natural gratitude to find better ways to engage in a symbiotic relationship with the biosphere. We can teach children that the food we grow does not belong

entirely to us as the farmers, but that it grew as a collaborative effort between us, the earth, the sun, the rain, and the insects, and therefore we have an inalienable responsibility to share it with the caterpillars, and with Mr. Cedric. In the same way that a flower can be seen as a gift from the land, so too is the tomato or the okra. The children’s spontaneous wish to contribute these gifts within the community demonstrates their already burgeoning value systems, which seem to embody these nearly lost traditions.

Sharing this mindset with children empowers them to develop around the ideas of collectivism, instead of staunch individualism. Without seeing themselves as a critical member of a wider community of living and not living, human and not human, our efforts to teach social justice are limited. As Angela Davis reminds us, we need to sustain the earth in order to create a just world upon it.

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Noticing Children's Competencies

Relationships are at the center of our work and we pay close attention to children's ability to connect and empathize with the world around them. Today, we witnessed the ways in the children's world is much more fluid and expansive than adults.

While on the playscape, Ellison approached me with a look of worry on her face.

Ellison: Ms. Rukia, I have to show you something!

She waved her arm and beckoned me to follow her.

Ellison: I need to show you the tree.

I followed her until she stopped in front of the tree and pointed toward its branches.

Ellison: Its dying! Look...there is no leaves on the branches. Look at the top of the tree. There is no leaves!

(The tree had been ill for some time.)

Ms. Rukia: Yes, I see, what should we do about it?

Ellison: Water. I think it needs water.

Using the water hose, Ellison gently offers water to the tree.

Ellison began to share the story of the tree with the other children and collective concern grew.

Several of the children lay hands on the tree ... rubbing and hugging the tree.

I wondered, who taught them to hug the tree? My thoughts shifted to recognize the ways in which we use touch to connect, to embrace and to console the children all the time. We hug them every day and they are using to the same strategies to help comfort the tree.

Francis: "I am rubbing the tree 'cause I want to take care of it."

We need to reframe our image of young children. They are far from being self-centered; instead, they deeply connect to the world around. We often teach that quality "out of them."

You cannot save what you do not love.

Our work begins with children.