

PRIMARY SCHOOL SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT WITH AUTH STUDENTS

by

Dasoula Eleni

Devoting fifteen hours of volunteer work on the environmental project of the first primary school in Plagiari proved to be a challenging, but also a quite interesting and rewarding experience. Indeed, it was rather impressive to encounter young children with so much knowledge about the issue of environmental pollution and the impact it has on our planet. I watched second graders water their small flower pots placed near the classroom window, fourth graders dig their potato garden, and almost all the students carefully throw their rubbish in the appropriate recycling bins that existed in their yard.



Fig. 1: Compost bin (author photo)

As a university student, who spent a whole semester studying the ethics found in environmental literature and ecocriticism in writers like Thoreau, Leopold, and Muir—to name just a few of them—seeing all that ecological theory applied in real action by such young children was an advantageous experience.

Consequently, what this essay seeks to draw attention to is how some of the environmental ethics we examined in the American environmental literature course have been experienced throughout the Primary School Service-Learning Project.

Specifically, I focus on how familiarization with nature can occur in an urban environment, how interconnectedness and the human impact on animals is perceived by sixth grade students, and finally, how the natural environment of a school yard can benefit students in the same way a city park can avail the citizens of a large urban center.



Fig. 2: Fencing the school garden plot (author photo).



Fig. 3: Digging potatoes in the garden (author photo).

To begin with, it seems to me that the successful outcome of this environmental project stems from John Burroughs's fundamental principle that "the best place to study nature is at one's home" (169). And by this, it is implied that since students spend almost half of their daily lives in school, what could be more suitable for achieving "intimacy" and "[f]amiliarity" with nature than integrating the natural environment in their school yard? (Burroughs 169). Barbara Kingsolver agrees that "[i]t's a privilege to live any part of one's life in proximity to nature" (945). Notably, by saying so, the writer suggests conducting a life in a strictly rural environment, outside the borders of the city. What is more, she has confessed feeling really sorry for the children of urban areas, who remain "in pure dismay at seeing [one] pull carrots from the ground" (Kingsolver 945).

In contrast to her experiences, however, I was amazed to witness the environmental knowledge demonstrated by students of the

Plagiary primary school, who are all growing up in the city suburbs. They contradict Kingsolver's observation by proclaiming their knowledge not only about how carrots grow, but also about how potatoes are planted and are taken care of, how oil is produced by olives, and how special botanic plants can be cultivated. And, all of this knowledge has been acquired in a common state school located in the outskirts of Thessaloniki. Therefore, it can be suggested that if one's home is in the city, nature can also exist there.

Furthermore, during the service-learning project with my fellow students we were given the opportunity to introduce to some sixth-grade students Aldo Leopold's concept of "Thinking Like a Mountain." The story Leopold tells was presented to them as a fairy-tale in order to help enrich their knowledge about wild animals that are near extinction, as is the case with wolves, and to help them get acquainted with the ecological concepts of interconnectedness and natural balance. The children managed to decode the meaning of "green fire," or the secret that was known only to the mountain and the dying wolf (Leopold 275). They also realized that both humans and animals "all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life" (Leopold 276). Additionally, having experienced themselves how much time is required for trees to grow up and how much care some plants need in order to thrive, they were in the position to comprehend quite well the tremendous effects and dangers that the deforestation of a mountain can cause.

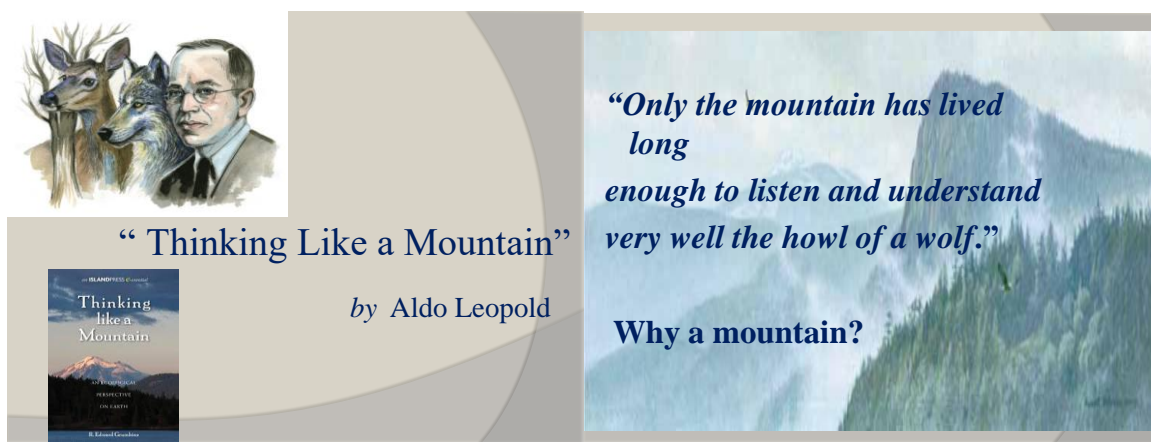


Fig. 4: From PowerPoint prepared for the lesson.

Finally, through this service-learning project, I realized how beneficial it can be for students to maintain regular and close contact with the natural environment of their school yard. In fact, the "conditions remedial" that the construction of a big natural park can afford the citizens of an urban area, can similarly be offered to students of all ages by incorporating some natural elements in the school yard (Olmsted 121). Particularly, Frederick L. Olmsted explains that the construction of the Central Park, with its distant vision of "an open pastoral landscape," can avail both the physical and the mental condition of New York citizens by enhancing their sense of freedom, stimulating their imagination, providing them with clean oxygen to breath, and triggering their creativity (123). In the same sense, a school yard surrounded by high and strong trees, under whose shadow children can rest, and special open places, where children can cultivate small gardens or plant colorful flowers, provide the same beneficial purpose. Apart from rendering the school environment a more inviting and vivid place, it also stimulates

learners' inspiration and enhances their concentration on the lesson, while at the same time, it helps them remain close to nature and enjoy its uplifting benefits.



Fig. 5: Classroom plants (author photo).

In conclusion, the service-learning project in the primary school offered me enough opportunities to see how the theory about environmental ethics can be applied in action, especially by such young children. Apart from their excellent job with the recycling as well as with their botanic and vegetable gardens, these kids seem to have realized something of paramount importance that unfortunately most of the adults fail to comprehend: that nature and humans are interconnected and interlinked with an inseparable bound. As a result, the project has contributed to their very early experience of living in and near nature and of thinking always what impact their actions can have on it. Besides, as Henry David Thoreau highlights, “[h]ow could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?” (17). Therefore, with their active participation in the effort to save our planet, children have already set the example for the rest of us to follow.



Fig. 6: Classroom plants (author photo).

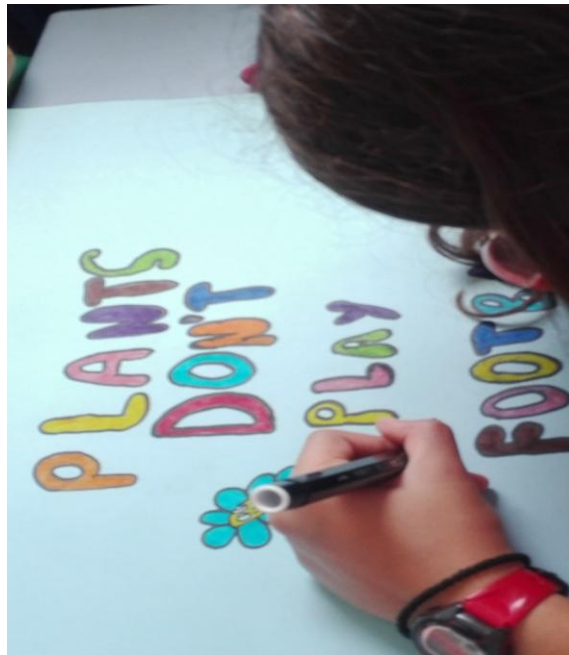


Fig. 7: Creating a sign for the garden (author photo).

Works Cited

- Burroughs, John. "Nature Near Home." *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, edited by Bill McKibben, The Library of America, 2008, pp. 168-171.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. "Knowing Our Place." *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, edited by Bill McKibben, The Library of America, 2008, pp. 939-947.
- Leopold, Aldo. "From *A Sand Country Almanac*." *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, edited by Bill McKibben, The Library of America, 2008, pp. 266-277.
- Olmsted, Frederick L. "A Review of Recent Changes, and Changes Which Have Been Projected, in the Plans of the Central Park." *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, edited by Bill McKibben, The Library of America, 2008, pp. 120-125.
- Thoreau, Henry D. "From *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*." *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, edited by Bill McKibben, The Library of America, 2008, pp. 9-25.