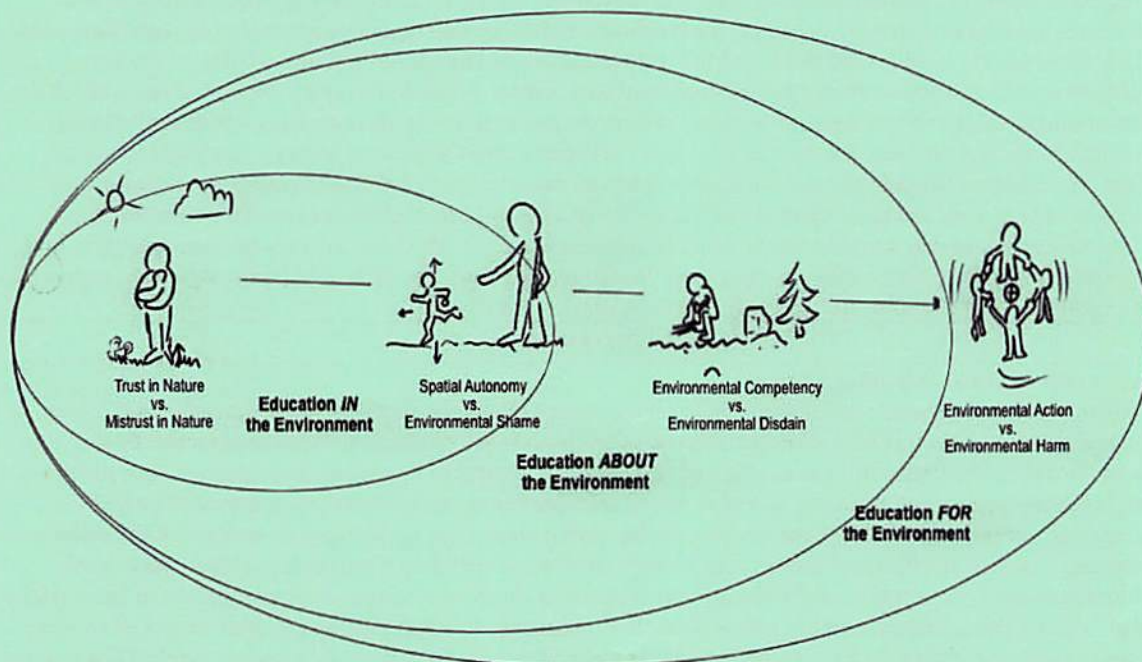


Environmental Identity Development in an Alaska Native Education Context

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A Model of Environmental Identity Development © Carie Green 2015

What is Environmental Identity?

- An aspect of a person's self concept
- Considers the natural world socialization of a child, specifically, how nature informs who we are
- Self-cognitions (emotions, morals, beliefs, values, understandings)
- Influences actions and behaviors
- Ranges from low to high, with a stronger identity resulting in stronger motivations and commitments to ACT for the Environment" (Clayton, 2003).

What is Environmental Identity Development (EID)?

- Considers how an individual's identity develops or progresses
- Related and influenced by social, cultural, geographical, and familial contexts
- Characterized by four progressions
- Healthy EID is dependent on overcoming inner and outer tensions in each progression

Four Progressions of Environmental Identity Development (EID)

Foundation

Trust in Nature vs. Mistrust in Nature

Beginning with *Trust in Nature vs. Mistrust in Nature*, feelings of assurance and comfort in nature vs. feelings of anxiety and discomfort are fundamental to a child's ability to progress along the continuum of healthy EID. Through consistent and sustained encounters with the natural world, children have the opportunity to see, smell, hear, touch, and taste their environments. Such sensory-rich experiences are paramount to identity formation as the feel of the wind, the smell of the trees, and the taste of the air become inscribed into a child's very being. Social interactions with adults and peers play an important role; caregivers and educators can talk to them about the natural surroundings, share in their sense of wonder, and encourage children to form trusting bonds with places, beings, and objects during each encounter. The goal is to facilitate a child's sense of trust vs. mistrust in nature, meaning that it is essential that adults meet children's needs by ensuring physical and psychological comfort during nature experiences (i.e. making sure a child is clothed properly and supported when encountering new things). In this way, it is also essential that caregivers/educators facilitate a healthy respect for nature's inherent dangers. This, in turn, helps a young child gain comfort in nature, while also recognizing that there are certain aspects in nature in which to be cautious of or to avoid (i.e. a prickly cactus, a bear).

First Progression

Spatial Autonomy vs. Environmental Shame

A trusting bond with nature encourages children to venture out, independently or collectively with others, to achieve *Spatial Autonomy*. In this way, children discover their own sense of place in the natural world; this, in turn enables them to explore attributes of their environmental identity. Nature in this sense, becomes a mirror in which to view one's self, a special rock becomes an extension of self, providing comfort and reassurance to process thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs. Contrary to gaining spatial autonomy are feelings of doubt or *Environmental Shame*, whereas, a lack of comfort and security may cause children to withdraw from nature experiences. Such negative cognitions may occur when adults discourage or prohibit children's independent exploration in the outdoor environment. Young children may initially stay within close proximity to adults, but as children's level of comfort matures they venture out further on their own. Caregivers and educators need allow for a certain level of risk-taking behaviors in children's engagement with nature. It is through such risk and independent experiences that children gain a sense of spatial autonomy and confidence in securing environmental competencies (as described in the next progression).

Second Progression

Environmental Competency vs. Environmental Disdain

Healthy cognitions connected with discovering a sense of spatial autonomy provide children with opportunities to acquire *Environmental Competencies* gained through experimentation and creative innovations, which enrich children's experiences in nature. Fantasy play and experimentation provide children with opportunities to exercise their creativity, and emerging critical thinking and problem-solving skills to symbolically represent objects or scenarios (i.e. using a stick as a spoon, creating a "house" in a bush, building a bird's nest). In opposition, a lack of opportunities to take initiative in nature could lead to *Environmental Disdain*, or cognitions of contempt that separate children from the natural world. Instead of using the environment to fulfill one's sense of purpose, children may become indifferent to their natural surroundings instead developing competencies associated with aspects of the material world. Caregivers and educators can support children's development of environmental competencies by furthering understanding and applicability of ecological concepts related to children's interests.

Third Progression

Environmental Action vs. Environmental Harm

A strong sense of trust in the environment, spatial autonomy with the environment, and environmental competency to use the environment to fulfill a sense of purpose, thus motivates children to exercise *Environmental Action*. In this way, children's previously acquired self-cognitions (i.e. values, knowledge, and care for the environment) can be applied towards environmental stewardship or creating a more sustainable future. The scale of such actions will likely be situated within familiar social and environmental contexts. In contrast, children who lack in their development in any one of the preceding environmental identity attributes may develop an environmental identity that is ignorant of or disregards the natural world. This, in turn, may lead to the establishment of dispositions or behaviors that promulgate *Environmental Harm*.

Environmental Action is the goal of a healthy EID. Moreover, caregivers/educators play an essential role in modeling and helping children consider ecological values and behaviors, while also promoting inquiry and action in response to environmental challenges. Peer culture also influences children's EID. In this way, children are recognized as competent social actors, active in the construction of their own lives and the lives of those around them. Strong environmental identity cognitions can lead children to initiate action with peers, independent from adults. However, weak environmental identity cognitions may prematurely expose children to exercise environmental actions in which they may not be developmentally ready to take on.