





EDITORIAL

Indigenous philosophy in environmental education

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(Received 06 August 2023; revised 22 August 2023; accepted 22 August 2023)

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge; Indigenous philosophy; environmental education; place-based knowledge; place-responsiveness

The editorial group acknowledges the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge keepers and their past and continuous relationships with place, on every continent on earth where humans have lived for aeons. Indigenous wisdom is their life-giving gift to communities everywhere for planetary futures. It is precious, having integrity and an ethic of responsibility and care. Indigenous wisdom as environmental education is the oldest education, being tens of thousands of years of continuity before waves of apocalyptic colonial violence during the last few centuries interrupted lifeways and language-embedded knowledge systems, some forever gone. Indigenous Elders across the world have maintained the stories and relational knowledges of those peoples who have survived this violence. They recognised that a time would come for these knowledges to be honoured, respected, and learned once again, this time including accounts of colonial impact. This is a worldwide movement in which re-enlivening ancient and submerged knowledges and learning-with and from places – such as rivers or forests – is taking place (Bird Rose, 2022; Blaise & Hamm, 2020; Kohn, 2013).

The process of colonisation continues as neoliberal power-over ways of practice such as welfare systems and industrial developments without Indigenous and/or local consent. In this unceasing process, places and people are invaded, colonised, and often ignored or abused, causing the separation of people and place in unworkable ways that are ultimately responsible for climate chaos, species loss and injustice on a global scale. Because of continuing colonisation, decolonising frameworks that are inclusive, participatory, and collaborative are essential for working with Indigenous¹ wisdom and philosophy in all contexts. This explains why regeneration and Indigenous emancipation go together, and this is now the basis of a learning movement worldwide (Williams, 2021; Winter, 2021). This Special Issue (SI) adds momentum to the movement. Working towards the regeneration of Indigenous wisdom is one of the most important education tasks of our day.

A strong theme in this SI is decolonisation (Williams et al., 2018; Williams, 2021), which is necessary for learning Indigenous wisdom and particularly, renewing ways of relating to, restoring, and protecting places. Given the crisis of life in the biosphere, authors in this SI and

elsewhere (Arnold et al., 2021; Kothari et al., 2019) assert that the time for Indigenous-led collective social renewal is now. “Indigenous survivance” is an active sense of Indigenous presence (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021, Vizenor, 2008). The term is now in general use in Indigenous writing and activism, and includes sovereignty, heritable rights, resistance and cultural vibrance. Tuhiwai Smith (2021) writes: “Survivance accentuates the degree to which Indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism” (2021, p. 166).

In the spirit of Indigenous survivance and collective socio-ecological renewal, it is a pleasure to celebrate Indigenous philosophy in environmental education. For the editorial group, this SI has been an important journey of learning as we have read, appreciated, and supported the works of committed researchers from around the world. Reviewers have taught us that some of these ideas need to be crafted with great clarity for relatively new readers to Indigenous writing, because the constructs can be tricky to comprehend; they vary substantially from mainstream understandings about the world. That said, there are important questions at the core of this project, one of which concerns the meaning of Indigenous, while another is the matter of Indigenous philosophy – what it is, and how it can and should inform educators.

What do we mean by Indigenous?

The meaning of Indigenous is complex due to colonial histories and continuing colonial presences; political and economic imperatives – particularly referring to stolen Indigenous Lands; imposed government obligations; the nature of socio-cultural responsibilities of Indigenous custodians; and legal matters still unresolved after so many hundreds of years. We cannot even briefly review the meaning of Indigenous, but we can offer two different perspectives and a discussion, then a historical context to show the significance of Indigenous philosophy in environmental education.

Rather than a definition, the UN outline a modern understanding of Indigeneity:

Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member. • Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies • Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources • Distinct social, economic or political systems • Distinct language, culture and beliefs • Form non-dominant groups of society • Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. (UNPFII, *nd.*)

On the other hand, the work of Royal provides a broader, place-based definition which he suggests is the foundation for kinship between humanity and earth:

To be indigenous is to be born from the land where you live, and continually born and reborn through an intimate relationship with earth, sea and sky. . . . These traditions speak of an intimate relationship between humankind and the earth. (2007, p. 6)

For economic and political reasons in Australia, some understandings of Indigenous are binary – Indigenous or not – and necessary for native title and Land rights. On the other hand, the movement for re-indigenisation (Williams, 2019, 2021) and relearning relationships with place, suggests a continuum of Indigenous learning perspectives more aligned with the sense of intimate relationship between humankind and the earth, described above in Royal (2007). In this SI, Williams (insert reference) refers to Indigenous planetary futures² which enable the “long ago colonised” to learn from Indigenous place-philosophies and see this as an intergenerational learning endeavour. She stresses that intergenerational knowledge transfer and connectivity can

enable these futures. This has highly significant implications for environmental educators. For a clear, simple example of intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer in the early years, we recommend viewing the small film called *Babanil*³ (Perdrisat, 2023).

For a historical context we draw on Tuhiwai Smith (2021) who shows the Indigenous “problem,” is that of Indigenous presence on Indigenous Lands coveted by colonisers. After Indigenous people were hunted and placed in reserves, the “Indigenous problem” became one of policy discourse and “deficit.” The discourse is now changing with a shift from deficits – to strengths – to flourishing-based approaches which recognise that what enables well-being for Indigenous peoples is what enables well-being and flourishing for all (Bullen et al., 2023). However, the Eurocentric psyche still holds a belief of Indigenous “problem,” leading to racism and more (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021, pp. 106–7). She writes that systematic undermining of Indigenous leaders’ legitimacy has been part of the colonisation strategy, which continues today. For ejustice reasons, the issue of continuing colonisation is increasingly recognised as *core business* in environmental education (Kayira et al., 2022; Korsant, 2022; Ormiston, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2019a). We need to understand the depth and impact of colonisation, and use strategies to decolonise our teaching, learning, relationships – and lives. This leads us to question the meaning of Indigenous philosophy.

What is Indigenous philosophy?

We address the question of Indigenous philosophy in this SI because many people ask about it, while others find the topic mysterious; yet it is central to First Law and Indigenous practice. Here we recommend Christine Winter’s (2021) inspiring book: *Intergenerational justice: Indigenous philosophy, the environment and relationships*. She explains that Indigenous grounded worldviews are place-based, relational and about the collective, revealing a relational autonomy that is deeply valued. Winter (2021) explains that Indigenous philosophies and worldviews do not privilege the present or see a linear future orientation and are cosmological in the sense that they do not privilege humans or distinctly differentiate material and spiritual. They understand enduring, deep relationships between ancestral, future and living generations.

Within Indigenous philosophy there is permeability between qualities such as literal and metaphorical, living and death, non-living and living, future/ present and past, nonhuman and human, and spiritual and material. Indigenous worldviews have no exceptional rights or powers over non-living matter or nonhuman life, but there is a recognition of human and nonhuman connectedness and a comprehension of interconnectivity between non-living and living features of the environment. Within Indigenous worldviews, the well-being of culture is secured within environmental well-being. The two discourses – Indigenous worldviews and western liberal worldviews – are mismatched and incommensurable (Winter, 2021). It is noteworthy that “philosophy” in the west has historically been used in the sense of *theoria*⁴ such as logic without action or relationship (Mathews, 2009, 2017). In this SI authors tend to use the term “Indigenous philosophy” in reference to relational, creative and engaged ways of knowing place.

Perspectives, themes and sub-themes in this special issue

This SI offers a range of international indigenous and local perspectives, with authors coming from, representing or living in the Kasena ethnic group in Northern Ghana; Ogoniland in Nigeria; Deshkan Ziibi territory in Ontario, Canada; Aotearoa; the Cherokee nation of Oklahoma, USA; Somerset in England; the Upper Vara Valley, Northern Apennines, Italy; Québec, Canada; and Australia – from Nyikina Country⁵ in the West Australian Kimberley, Yolngu Country in the Northern Territory, Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung Country in the Kulin nation in Victoria, and a group of seven authors from ten nations in various states, being Jerrinja Country,

Ngiyampaa Country, Whadjuk and Wardandi Noongar Countries, Martur, Ngambri/Ngunnawal Countries, Gooreng Gooreng and Wakka Wakka Countries, and Walbunja Country.

There are interesting commonalities across the work, for example there is significant reference to renewing human-earth connection in local areas, which we see as an overarching key theme. In various ways and contexts, collaborative partnerships – inclusive of place-relations – are rethinking their places and the ways in which they relate. Sub-themes are communication with the more-than-human world; intergenerational cultural knowledge and Indigenous leadership; stories for maintaining ethics, values, and place-relations; and Indigenous knowledge and action on poison, polluted and toxic lands. These are introduced below.

Communication with the more-than-human world

The Bawaka Country group of authors from northern Australia (2023), in their article “Keepers of the Flame: Song Spirals are a University for Us”, explore people-place living connections, showing how more-than-human relationships and actions are capable of bringing everything to life. They report the use spirals of song – song spirals – to form a Yolngu Country-led pedagogy that shows the making and remaking of these life-giving relationships, which attend to the active agency of Country as teacher. They celebrate the intergenerational nature of this knowledge, ensuring this knowledge remains strong and “right way” according to Yolngu First Law. Relationality and responsibility are essential in this epistemology which recognises Country as knowledge-holder.

In their article “The teachings of mistle thrush and kingfisher,” British researchers Reason and Gillespie (2023) ask: What would it be like to learn to live in and experience a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How can we learn to awarely participate in a world of communication and interaction, in which trees, crows and rivers may grace us with a response to our attention and our call? They refer to the long-submerged current in western thought that is deeply divergent to the dominant mechanistic or dualistic perspective and offer two stories that reflect a sentient world. They find a world of living beings that declare their presence to those who are attuned; with whom some reciprocal exchange is possible; one using a poetic language, where meaning is conveyed through metaphor and image rather than English words or concepts.

Still within the theme of collaborating with the more-than-human world, in his article “Sustaining fecundity: artistic creation as care for life,” Weber (2023) states that artistic creation is as ancient as human culture. He says that for most of history, the arts have been used as communication between ancestral creation powers and people. He writes that the arts serve the purpose of nurturing the overarching fertility of life and explains how humans can experience the invisible energies of reality as aliveness (joy/desire to give) and transfer them by poetic and artistic creation. He uses Indigenous examples to illustrate the notion of ancestral power or shimmer, revealing a crucial means to participate in a life-giving cosmos. Whilst western culture has largely lost this attitude, Weber shows how art remains a domain where aliveness is co-located with imaginational means. In the current global crisis of life, he says it is crucial to remember the potential of the arts to relate and contribute to aliveness. Thus, environmental education programmes need to engage direct perception and expressive imagination of aliveness.

Intergenerational cultural knowledge and Indigenous leadership

Respect for Indigenous Elders and leaders is a very important theme in this SI, because colonial past-presences can cause ill-informed educators to neglect Indigenous wisdom and ways of knowing, being and doing. Yet these Elder knowledges and ways of working is essential for passing on cultural knowledge to the next generation. Behind each article in this SI is a prioritising of Indigenous and local knowing, being and doing. This is essential for learning Indigenous and place-based knowledge, as colonisation has rendered Indigenous knowledge all but invisible in

many mainstream contexts. Thus, restoring respect for Indigenous Elders and authorities, and celebrating their integrity and gifts is essential for intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Thankfully this is changing, illustrating the significance of environmental educators supporting the movement of taking up this decolonising journey and foregrounding Indigenous survivance and knowledge sets. In her article, “From indigenous philosophy in EE to indigenous planetary futures, what would it take?”, Williams (2023) reminds readers of the significance of indigenous knowledges in addressing global crises. She explains a Whakapapa kinship-based approach to life and outlines three regenerative place-based strategies. Each strategy builds on the interconnectedness of contemporary global challenges and shows how Indigenous knowledges and lifeways play crucial roles in addressing these.

Stories for maintaining ethics, values and place-relations

Stories and storying are important themes in Indigenous lifeways and help to share, explain, and maintain ethics and values. “Kind regards,” by Somerville, McKenzie, Fuller, Godden, Harrison, Isaacs-Guthridge, and Turner (2023) use the creative practice of storying and sharing knowledge as their learning and research method. They say their process required ongoing openness to vulnerability; resisting the urge to remain silent; and they needed to risk being wrong. Their collective storying allowed negotiation of connection to place and Country. They noted emergent themes including Country and personal sites of significance, relationality, honouring childhood and children, the importance of practical sensory engagement and recognition of earth violence. Their practical approach is grounded in kindness, navigating their own collective research practices which they hope will inspire others.

Acharibasam and McVittie (2022), compose the article “Connecting children to nature through the integration of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge into early childhood environmental education.” They report the use of local Kasena cultural knowledge and ways of knowing and being in Early Childhood Environmental Education in Boania Primary School Northern Ghana. They describe the notion of two-eyed seeing, using both western and Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (so that children become competent in each), to integrate Indigenous Ecological Knowledge alongside western knowledge sets. Two Indigenous Elders taught the children through taking them outdoors for learning activities. Following this, in-depth interviews were held with nine children, the teacher, and the Elders about their experiences. The findings illustrate an Indigenous cultural framework of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility towards nature, and show that the integration of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge into environmental education has the potential to improve our relationships with the environment.

In their paper “Deepening our capacity for teaching with place,” Sutton, Bellingham and White (2023) report a pedagogy for relational learning to yield more ethical and decolonising place practices. The three authors are educators who are not Indigenous to their birth places or their current abodes, who engage in productive conversations inclusive of diversity of experience, voice, body, and place memory. They consider their response-abilities with Place for implementing regenerative pedagogies, situating their inquiry as storying that explores being and knowing as relationality. Their ethical commitment to decolonial practice reflects the need to live, love and learn with the places they are located. They prioritise Indigenous philosophies, voices, scholarship and Place-based ways of knowing through their various practices of education.

Indigenous knowledge and action on poison, polluted and toxic lands

There are three interesting cultural perspectives on poison or toxic lands, each of which involve responses to colonising, power-over decisions and actions. They involve the cultural care of places such as natural gas sites, as well as care of places desecrated by industrial development.

Poelina, Paradies, Woollorton, Mulligan, Guimond, Jackson-Barrett and Blaise, in their article “Learning to care for Dangaba” (2023) describe the importance of First Law stories. They focus on Dangaba, a woman of poison gas Country, through a cultural story and film link describing a woman who farts gas and the people die. She teaches the people that they must care for their Country, especially Country with gas. The story shows how to care for places – especially dangerous Country – as relation. To illustrate contrasting discourses, the authors also tell a story of a fossil fuel company claiming sustainable practices. In response to both stories, they call for contextualised narratives from the pluriverse of cultural accounts to be included with environmental education, on-Country, and in-classroom. They say Indigenous stories can help people shift from an everyday worldview of separation, infinite growth, consumption, and craving, for the sake of people and planet.

Bigby, Jim and Hatley (2023) in an article called “Indigenous-led toxic tours opening pathways for (re)connecting to Place, people and all creation,” tell a story about the fight of LEAD Agency for clean-up after massive environmental damage caused by decades of lead and zinc mining on Indigenous Lands without Indigenous consent. Impacts are felt across the ecosystem and human communities alike. Rather than abandon their Lands in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma (US), a place of immense cultural beauty, attachment to place and resilience, one of the primary tools for advocacy and education has been Indigenous-led toxic tours across their harmed lands and waters. In the article they share stories and experiences of important sites visited along the way, producing an illustrated snapshot of toxic tour experience. They describe the potential of Indigenous-led toxic tours for helping to (re)connect locals and visitors to Land and stewardship responsibilities.

Lele (2023) refers to serious pollution on indigenous Land in his article “Exploring environmental education programmes in oil producing indigenous communities in Niger Delta, Ogoniland, Nigeria.” He explains the local impacts of the over-simplistic modernist/economic development debate between globalisation and environmental justice. He has happy memories of growing up with his family, learning to farm on his father’s land, attending to food production and cultural production with his father. However, Indigenous communities in Ogoniland now experience socio-economic, environmental, health, and political problems – and serious pollution – due to multinationals’ exploration of crude oil. Within this context, he reports research on the types of environmental education programmes implemented by government and socio-environmental organisations in indigenous communities in Ogoniland. The intent of the programmes is to address multiple issues, and they contribute to the creation of environmental policy, environmental curriculum development and practical actions to mitigate environmental degradation and related socio-cultural impacts in indigenous communities. The study reveals the importance of indigenous knowledge and know-how to address environmental issues.

Book reviews

This SI collection includes three book reviews. Woollorton (2023) appraised “Indigenous and decolonising studies in education: mapping the long view,” edited by Tuhiwai Smith et al. (2019b). She recommends this very good collection of chapters to all teachers and educators, for its multiple ways of addressing decolonisation and its many descriptions of Indigenous values and ways of knowing, being and doing in a broad range of cultural contexts.

In the second book review, Kezabu (2023) considered “The intersectional environmentalist: how to dismantle systems of oppression to protect people + planet,” by Leah Thomas (2022). Kezabu recommends this book very highly because Thomas clearly shows how environmental injustice interconnects with social injustices such as racism. Kezabu notes Thomas’s explanation of entire communities having been endangered, ignored, and systemically silenced. Kezabu says Thomas advocates for those who have been overlooked, and for planetary well-being she insists on

equal consideration for all nonhuman and human planet inhabitants. Kezabu commends the reflective questions and resources provided to ensure understanding of this complex area where the book makes clear that systems of oppression need to be overhauled.

In the third book review, Sutton (2023) reports on “Indigenous intergenerational resilience: confronting cultural and ecological crisis,” by Lewis Williams (2021). Sutton is inspired by the book, which extends and deepens her knowledge of Indigenous intergenerational resilience. She says that for her, the book was thought-provoking, engaging and sometimes unsettling. Sutton indicates “unsettledness” seems an important part of learning to contend with “response-abilities.” Here, she means learning to respond to the agency of place-relationships, which she says are integral to enacting place pedagogies that are more ethical. She recommends the book as provocation for sustainability and environmental educators, and for those wanting to deepen place connections through learning with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Concluding remarks

It was noted in the call for papers that the editorial group’s interest is in relearning how to love, feel, hear, and live with places. The papers within this SI apply Indigenous philosophy to address this requirement with beauty. Authors show how Indigenous philosophy can make a significant difference to life on this planet, particularly if it is relocated as the foundational knowledge of society and place and includes change-making strategies that are intersectoral and broad, and which take account of the contemporary nature of global challenges. Tangible evidence of this is the collective effort to relive, relearn and reteach in intimate relationship with places put forward in this SI with respect to ancient and contemporary Indigenous knowledges and wisdom.

A central theme throughout this SI is the need for regenerating Indigenous wisdom. Given the global crises facing humanity and the environment, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into education through Indigenous leadership is a crucial task for our times. The articles in this issue present diverse perspectives and strategies for [re]connecting with place[s], fostering ethical relationships and embracing Indigenous philosophies. As noted by Bishop (2023), values such as humility, deep listening and respect among other aspects of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are more than merely concepts to “do,” they are “axiological ways to be” in the world (p. 1).

In the spirit of Indigenous survivance and collective socio-ecological renewal, the editorial group is honoured to have embarked on this journey of learning. The articles in this issue have deepened their understanding of Indigenous philosophy and the transformative power it holds. The path forward lies in decolonising teaching, learning, relationships and lives, and in embracing Indigenous wisdom as foundational knowledge for society and place.

The editorial group extends its heartfelt gratitude to all the committed researchers, authors and reviewers from around the world who have contributed to this transformative SI. The insights shared here are not only valuable for the realm of environmental education but have implications that reach far beyond, as we collectively strive to build a more just, sustainable and interconnected world.

Acknowledgements. The editorial group extend our sincere thanks to authors for their contributions to this SI, and for the cheerful spirit in which suggestions from reviewers and editors were implemented. We also wish to thank each of the authors for their comments on an earlier version of this editorial. We acknowledge the generosity, time and commitment of reviewers, and thank them for the ways they have helped to bring forward the gifts in each article. We acknowledge the special contribution by Peter Reason, who reminded us of the many unfamiliar ideas for new readers to this field of learning. We thank Peter Reason, Kat Riley, and Joe Ferguson for their comments on an earlier version of this editorial. Huge thanks to Peta White, Editor-in-Chief of the Australian Journal of Environmental Education, for her encouragement and support of this venture.

Competing interests. None.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical standard. Nothing to note.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the Special Issue and in this editorial, Indigenous (capitalised) and indigenous are used as per the author papers, in recognition of and giving respect to author preferences and national protocols.
- 2 We say futures (rather than future) because there are many worlds of Indigenous experience on the planet, each of which may anticipate a different future.
- 3 View the film Babanil here: <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/babanil/video/FA2212W001S00>
- 4 *Theoria* was used in the Greek origins of philosophy, meaning to look at and represent, or map. The term “theory” is derived from it (Mathews, 2009).
- 5 Note the use of Land and Country, which are sometimes capitalised to acknowledge understandings that are broader than the English language use of these terms. Country is an Australian use, whilst Land is frequently used in North America. For many Indigenous peoples, understandings of Land and Country include the notion of spiritual interconnectedness, a living, sentient and relational ecosphere – where all beings are kin – and responsive. Increasingly, in Australia this recognition of the liveliness of place is being taken up in general use irrespective of capitalisation.

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Mindy Blaise is a Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow, Professor and Co-director of the Centre for People, Place and Planet at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. She is the co-founder of several feminist research collectives, including #FEAS, Feminist Educators Against Sexism, and The Common Worlds Research Collective. Her feminist and anti-colonial inquiries set out to make new knowledge pathways with children, place, and more-than-human others.