

A/R/TOGRAPHY OF LIFE LEARNING: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCE AND ECO-CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY OF CHILDHOOD BEFORE THE ADVENT OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING IN TIBET

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Abstract

In this paper, I describe and explore a cultural and historical context of children's lived experience prior to the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. Specifically, I focus on how children had been learning without schools, and what these life learning experiences meant to them. In doing so, I engage unschooling (Holt, 1972, 1974, 1976 1983; Holt & Farenga, 2003; Ricci, 2012) as my culturally responsive theoretical framework in order to acknowledge and recognize the historical significance of these unique learning contexts. In addition, I choose a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004; Leavy, 2012) as my methodological framework in order to respect and acknowledge the arts-based cultural heritage of local communities. Therefore, I celebrate the success and challenges of local children's life learning experiences, as well as promote an eco-cultural understanding of how these historical learning experiences can inform educational policy, teachers, and the general public. This multi-modal arts-based study found that children's ways of life learning included creative playfulness, gender equal games, intergenerational learning; and the overall context of subsistence as eco-cultural sustainability. Through these ways of life learning, children have experienced their existential happiness in childhood and ontological freedom, as well as developed a sense of eco-cultural sustainability.

Keywords: unschooling in a cultural and historical context; life learning; a/r/tography; precolonial Tibet; children's well-being; eco-cultural sustainability

Author Note

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Introduction and Background



Figure 1. Nagchu, Tibet. January–March 1928. Courtesy of Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York. NRM archive ref. no: 405169.

The territories of indigenous peoples continue to harbour much of the world's biodiversity. It is unacceptable that many formal education systems around the world contribute to the erosion of indigenous languages, knowledge and ways of life. -Mrs. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, *UNESCO, 2017*.

This research is situated in precolonial villages of Tibet (1925-1959) because my previous research expeditions took place in a Tibetan trans-Himalayan community (Shugurova, 2005, 2009). Since then, I have not only been inspired by the Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage, but also intrigued by the local ways of life learning without schools and their sense of eco-cultural sustainability (Shugurova, 2017). These ways of learning have historically been shaped by a deep sense of respect and compassion toward all sentient beings (Devkota, 2013; Roerich, 1929/2004). In this context, life learning (i.e., natural learning) is a continuum of being and becoming, knowing and unknowing. An editor of *Life Learning Magazine*, Wendy Priesnitz (2017) suggested that life

learning is

self-directed learning that happens without attending school and without using any of the methods used by schools. . . . It is based on the knowledge that people are learning beings, and will learn eagerly and well, based on their intrinsic motivation. (para. 1)

In this view, intrinsic motivation is a driving force of life learning because a learner can follow one's will (Ricci, 2012) and, consequently, can actualize her talents, interests, passions, and sociocultural goals. In fact, Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that "to be motivated means to be moved to do something" (p. 54). Furthermore, Levin-Gutierrez (2015) defined motivation as an inner guiding process of decision making and goal accomplishments. Therefore, intrinsic motivation is about an action that a child decides to undertake because she finds it meaningful and enjoyable without any externally imposed outcomes (Holt & Farenga, 2003). Generally, life learning scholarship is a growing body of knowledge, in which intrinsic motivation and child-led activities are prioritized. However, there are no particular studies found about the historical significance of life learning in a broader context of *eco-cultural sustainability*; and what eco-cultural sustainability means to children (Shugurova, 2017). In addition, I was asked this question about a connection between natural learning without schools and eco-cultural sustainability during my oral defence by Dr. Rolstad (April 20, 2017). I provided an excellent answer then, and I was also intrigued to pursue this question in-depth in this follow-up analysis.

In this context, I loosely define eco-cultural sustainability as a way of being and a "holistic understanding of the world and the place of humans within it; it has a powerful ethical purpose; it is dialogic; it is about learning to learn how to make sense of the world around us and within us" (Blewitt, 2006, p. 6). I further discuss this concept and its epistemological significance in my theoretical review. In doing so, I hope to fill this identified gap in the literature in order to advance knowledge about a particular context of children's lived experience as life learners, as well as to explore children's self-

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cultivated ideas about eco-cultural sustainability during their childhood.

Specifically, I focus on a small rural community in Tibet prior to the colonization by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1950s and their development of compulsory schooling in the country. For this purpose, I engage a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004; Irwin & Springgay, 2008) as my culturally responsive methodology in order to develop and sustain my critical reflexivity throughout the research process, and to acknowledge an arts-based Buddhist eco-cultural and spiritual heritage of the research participants. The research questions are: 1) How had the local children been learning before the advent of compulsory schools in the 1950s? 2) What were their ways of learning? 3) What might we, as educators, interested in alternative education and unschooling, learn from these unique experiences about children's ways of life learning and their historical significance?

Past research has partially addressed some of the characteristics of child learning in these communities with a focus on the Buddhist ways of knowing and being, both in formally organized educational environments (e.g., monasteries) and in informal community-based settings (Shugurova, 2017). For example, Kunsang and Denno (2013) described their early childhood experiences (in 1980s) in Amdo as a happy way of well-being and well-becoming because children were given unrestricted freedom to play all day long. They wrote,

It was necessary for an adult to watch kids in the village until they could walk. After that, they could start going out with older kids. In most families, they were older siblings, cousins, or friends' kids who could go out with the younger ones. Nobody thought it was dangerous to give children this much freedom, and I can't think of any situations where it turned out badly. Kids usually spent the day outside together in groups. When the kids in one of the groups got hungry, they could go into any of their homes to get food and to go right back outside when they finished eating. If kids got tired, they might go home to sleep, or they might lie down and take a nap in the grass any place they were comfortable. It was pretty wild childhood—and I loved it. (p. 20)

Clearly, this local community-based context of childhood freedom was shaped by the culture of trust, kindness, and respect toward children and all community members. The children were trusted to be outside all day long without any adult supervision. Furthermore, children could develop a mutual sense of care toward each because they were allowed and encouraged to freely visit their neighbors. In this cultural context, children felt immense freedom and love. Kunsang and Denno (2013) named this experience as wild, because it was uncontrolled and unrestricted by adults and social norms, regulations, and institutions.

Likewise, Norberg-Hodge and Russell (1994) in their research with a Tibetan Himalayan community of Zangskar in Ladakh found that many local children are usually educated without any explicit instructions and adult supervision. In fact, children learn in a natural way by being in the community alongside with their parents, relatives, mixed age children, and neighbours. This natural way is about freedom, care, and love. For example, Norberg-Hodge and Russell observed that “the child received constant attention and love, and yet the parents at the same time remain so relaxed and easy-going that the child is allowed a great deal of independence and freedom to experiment. . . . The attitude towards children was always loving, but at the same time almost carefree” (p. 531). Further, children are allowed and encouraged to take part in daily activities alongside with adults without any imposed roles and obligations. However, this participation is a self-emergent activity, rather than a compulsory chore. All cultural activities help children be and become respectful and socially productive members of their communities. Yet social roles and duties are fluid, flexible, and dynamic, which means that children can freely choose to perform or not to perform them. Hence, children have multiple opportunities to experience freedom and enact their cultural agency in a broader community-based context of their participation as equal contributors (i.e., agents) of collective well-being. At the heart of this experience and participation is a mutual feeling of love and care.

Furthermore, Norbu and Turnbull (1968) in their memoir shared that precolonial childhood in Tibet

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was happy because children could play freely with each other outdoors alongside their brothers,

sisters, parents, and community members. In this way, children could have access to all cultural spaces/places as well as take part in all age-appropriate cultural activities/practices. Some of these activities were differentiated with age and gender; however many activities didn't have any gender specific segregations. For example, they wrote,

I was too young to be able to help my father in the fields—a boy must be ten years old anyway before he can be of real use, and in any case parents like to see their children playing. I have many friends in the village, but most of all I liked playing with my sister. My very earliest memories are like my dreams, and I can see myself being bundled up in woolen blankets by my mother and put in a corner where I could not get into trouble while she worked. The first real memory I have is of a day in autumn when all the colors in the fields and on the other sides of mountains were changing. My sister and I went into the fields to play almost every day because the straw that had been cut was piled up and we have made a little house by burrowing into the pile and making little rooms. Into one room we had brought some flat stones, making a table. Other small stones we used as dishes. (Norbu & Turnbull, 1968, p. 53)

Clearly, children's well-being was about their playful participation in their communities outdoors with an unrestricted access to all cultural activities and resources. It is also important to note that this cultural context has been shaped by a profound Buddhist religious thought since its introduction in Tibet in the 7th – 8th century by a spiritual teacher from Udiyana, Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava (Shukla & Dikshit, 2009). This thought has primarily been focused on compassion and loving-kindness toward all sentient beings and the universe. Compassion “is an art, the masterpiece, of which is a state of spontaneous, equanimous love, and understanding toward all beings” (Novick, 2012, p. 55).

Ultimately, compassion is the wisdom of one's natural being and becoming because it embodies all manifestations of consciousness (Gyatso, 2011). According to Padmasambhava, learning should lead

all learners toward their immanent perfection and natural freedom. At the heart of this learning process is one's intentional awareness that can never be imposed with external means because it is the *nature of mind* (Padmasambhava as cited in Schmidt, 1994). Padmasambhava further explained,

This awakened mind of awareness is not made out of any material substance; it is self-existing and inherent in yourself. This is the nature of things that is easy to realize because it is not to be sought for elsewhere. This is the nature of mind that does not consist of a concrete perceiver and something perceived to fixate on. It defies the limitations of permanence and annihilation. In it there is nothing to awaken; the awakened state of enlightenment is your own awareness that is naturally awake. . . . When you understand that the innate nature, free from bias and partiality, is present in yourself, there is no difference between great and small learning. (p. 102)

In this context, natural (i.e., life) learning is a creative process that “intrinsically moves toward its own self-realization” (King, 1991, p. 84). It is also important to note that the concept of learning is not about an objective transmission of information. Trungpa (2004) teaches us that the Tibetan term *sbyong pa* means learning in “a sense of exploration of our state of being that is independent of education and information collecting” (p. 115). Ultimately, learners decide how/what/when/why they want to learn and through what contexts.

Therefore, children's learning activities were embedded in everyday life. This intrinsic connection between life learning and freedom also reflects the Buddha's Teachings. Rokotova (1926/1971) wrote, “The Buddha is the Liberator. He liberates, because he himself has been liberated. Ancient writings always emphasize the vital applicability of his teaching. Gotama did not avoid life, but took part in the daily life [of people]” (p. 13). The Buddha's pedagogy of learning was “an active investigation of the dharma teachings to see if they are valid, applicable to one's situation and helpful to one's growth” (Landaw & Weber, 2006, p. 17). Children and adults are usually perceived as lifelong learners of the Dharma (i.e., the nature of the universe and teachings of the Buddha). At the center of this religious

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. thought is one's spiritual attainment of enlightenment and liberation from the bonds of suffering, as well as one's ongoing cultivation of compassion toward all beings. This spiritual wisdom is the intrinsic and implicit fabric of people's daily lives.

Therefore, all Buddhist ideas about learning are inseparable from one's deep understandings and awareness of compassion. Buddhist monk, Nhat Hanh (1997) explains that "understanding is the essence of love. If you cannot understand, you cannot love. That is the message of the Buddha" (p. 2). When children can learn in this spontaneous and natural way without any interruption and imposed reasoning, they can organically become aware of their immanent awakened mind. The path of natural learning is often described in the Buddhist literature through poetic sutras, sutras, and tantric art as "the most unrestricted way of learning with tolerance and patience, without any sectarianism" (Roerich, 1967, p. 191). These pathways have helped many children to lead their lives with the power of compassion and love.

It is also important to emphasize that the cultural context of compassionate Dharma has allowed children to become mindful of other than human beings and to learn about eco-cultural sustainability alongside animals, wild pastures, and natural environment. For example, the Dalai Lama XIV described his childhood place with the following beautiful scene,

Our village, which lay on a little plateau, was almost encircled by fertile fields of wheat and barley; and the plateau, in turn, was surrounded by ranges of hills which were covered by grass- thick and vividly green. To the south of the village there was a mountain which was higher than the rest. Its name was Am-chiri, but the local people also called it the Mountain which Pierced the Sky, and it was regarded as the abode of the guardian deity of the place. Its lower slopes were covered by forests; above them a rich growth of grass could be seen; higher still, the rock was bare; and on the summit was a patch of snow which never melted. On the Northern face of the mountain, there were junipers and poplars, peaches, plums, and walnuts, and many kinds of berries and scented flowers.

Clear springs of water fell in cascades and the birds and the wild animals- deer, wild ashes, monkeys, and a few leopards, bears, and foxes- all wandered unafraid of men [sic]; for our people were Buddhists who would never willingly harm a living creature. (1962, p. 11)

Therefore, sustainable experience of local childhood encompassed not only the local cultural knowledge, but also diverse ecological relations with other visible and invisible beings. Children could observe, watch, and interact with many animals and plants on a daily basis. The culture of compassion was inclusive and tolerant because children could naturally learn to respect and care for the world around them. However, it is important to remain cognizant that the local communities should neither be idealized nor romanticized in order to avoid misrepresentations and generalizations (Na'ia Alessa, 2009).

Theoretical Context: Understanding Life Learning

Based on the literature review, I engage unschooling as my culturally responsive theoretical framework in order to acknowledge and recognize the historical significance of local learning contexts and childhood experiences. At the heart of unschooling is a profound context of respect, care, love, compassion, and trust, in and through which children can have their freedom and power to learn naturally and willfully (Ricci, 2012). Therefore, unschooling is committed to the observance and sustenance of the basic human right to learning. One of the visionary and inspirational founders of unschooling movement, Holt (1976) wrote, “Next to the right to life itself, the most fundamental to all human rights is the right to control our own minds and thoughts. That means, the right to decide for ourselves how we will explore the world around us, think about our own and other persons’ experiences, and find and make the meaning of our own lives” (p. 3). Unschoolers celebrate this right and trust children to follow their passions and to develop their interests in a meaningful way without any externally prescribed and controlled script (Laricchia, 2007; Rolstad as cited in Ricci, 2010). In this view, unschooling allows me to respectfully connect with the cultural and historical context of

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. childhood without schools with a focus on children's life learning experiences.

Life Learning Experience and Childhood

Basically, life learning is an organic way of being and becoming; it is “a way of life [that] respects an individual's body, mind, and spirit. To this end, life learning is not a recipe that one has to follow, but it is a process that differs from situation to situation” (Ricci, 2017, para. 3-4). In this view, children are not perceived as less competent or less capable than adults due to age differences. Children are not idealized as cute or innocent. Children, just like adults, are human beings who are learning all the time (Holt, 1989). Holt (1976) wrote, “When we think of children as cute we abstract and idealise them, judge them, exploit them, and worst of all, teach them to exploit us and each other, to sell themselves for smiles and rewards. This is in every way bad for them and for their relations with us” (p. 49). Holt's view somewhat reflects the Tibetan Buddhist popular cultural idea that the concept of childhood should not be separated from the concept of adulthood. Gross (1998) found that the idea of childhood doesn't hold any sentimental or sacramental connotation; and the sociocultural institution of childhood doesn't have any religious meaning. Children have their karma, which is about one's individual experience from previous lives and the current life time (Gross, 1996, 2006). Rokotova (1926/1971) wrote that karma is, ultimately, “created by thoughts” (p. 45). Often children perform and demonstrate their karmic knowledge through play, free explorations, and other forms of life learning processes.

Therefore, adults usually pay particular attention to these expressions of free thoughts, ideas and behavior (Brown, Farwell, & Nyerongsha, 2008). Spiritual leaders can recognize religious incarnations among children by letting children share and reveal what they know and remember from their previous lives (David-Neel, 1929/1971). In his early childhood, the Dalai Lama expressed his spiritual will to take his parents around various holy places and sacred grounds as well as to teach them about their cultural significance. He knew all of these places by heart (Brown, Farwell,

& Nyerongsha, 2008). This example shows that children's karma and karmic experiences were regarded not as cute or naïve, innocent or insignificant; but as important meaning making activities, spiritual reflections, creative ideas, and purposeful behaviors.

Furthermore, life learning experience is transformational because it creatively leads children toward their self-realization, self-actualization, and, consequently, identity formations (Cajete, 1994; hooks, 1994; Ricci, 2017). Life learning is always an experiential event with lots of hands-on activities, cultural practices, and creative applications of ideas. This experience forms a historical continuum (Holt, 1970) of being across lifespan, including one's afterlife becoming. As Dewey (1916/2004) said, "Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life" (p. 2). Holt (1970) also emphasized the importance of this continuum, through which children creatively construct their mental awareness and models of themselves and their world. This intrinsic awareness develops into new knowledge and understanding because "children have been learning, all the time, for all their lives" (p. 23). In this view, the lens of life learning allows me to respect people's learning experiences on their own terms. In doing so, multiple risks of generalizations, idealization, and misrepresentations are minimized in my theorization.

Moreover, this lens helps me to recognize the intrinsic value of freedom in children's experiences. According to Petrovic and Rolstad (2016), unschooling is "driven by an emphasis on freedom and self-decision making" (p. 4). This concept of freedom is learner-centered because a learner is in control of her activities because she has the power to give meaning to her experiences. However, freedom is not about an unstructured learning experience, as it is often assumed. Holt (1972) critically observed that it is an error to dichotomize schooled learning as structured and unschooled learning as unstructured because "there are no such things as 'unstructured' situations. They are not possible" (p. 4). When children learn naturally, they purposefully construct their structures of ideas and experiences. In fact, all children are natural scientists and their meaning making activities resemble a highly sophisticated

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. scientific method (Holt, 1967). Also, Gray (2013) found that all valuable life lessons, such as discovery of one's passions, interpersonal skills, and self-control of emotions, "can only be learned through free, self-directed experience [such as creative play]" (p. 272). Therefore, freedom is not a socially imposed idea; it is the very *nature* of life learning. Petrovic and Rolstad (2016) wrote, "Freedom and autonomy are required for development of the child as a person who is intellectually independent, capable of living and conducting him or herself in harmony with others, and can lead a flourishing life while caring for the flourishing of others" (p. 5). Child's free learning experience is driven by her intrinsic motivation (Gray, 2013). As I discuss in my introduction, intrinsic motivation is "a desire for accomplishing a task for reasons of enjoyment, personal interest, or importance to the individual and not imposed by anybody else" (Levin-Gutierrez, 2015, p. 37). There is a direct connection between freedom and intrinsic motivation (Gray, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Csikszentmihalyi found that freedom often means one's open access to leisure activities. Also people tend to experience high quality of life and overall well-being when they experience freedom on a daily basis (2014). The concept of freedom is important to highlight because it also reflects the Tibetan Buddhist idea of freedom and liberation. As the Dalai Lama XIV (1993) said, "As Buddhists, we Tibetans revere human life as the most precious gift and regard the Buddha's philosophy and teaching as a path to the highest kind of freedom. A goal to be attained by men and women alike" (para. 6). Therefore, the natural path of life learning is the path toward the Buddhist goal of spiritual wisdom and enlightenment.

In addition, life learning experiences allow children to develop a holistic understanding of the world and to mindfully understand the meaning of eco-cultural sustainability in real life situations. Ricci (2017) wrote that "another important part of life learning is mindfulness of being in the moment" (para. 25). According to Hanh (2015), mindfulness is at the heart of Buddhism; it is "the energy that brings us back to the present moment. To cultivate mindfulness is to cultivate Buddha within" (p. 64). Therefore, mindfulness is always situated in a holistic perception and recognition of

the living world and its ecological diversity. Many life learners describe their intrinsic awareness of and connection with the natural world on a daily basis (Hewitt, 2014; Ricci, 2017). These connections are spontaneous because they emerge from within one's inner self. For example, Hewitt (2014) shared his children's love to play outdoors with the rain and all other creatures; "it is possible that the only difference between a child who plays in the rain and one who doesn't is that the latter has been taught to avoid the rain" (p. 81). Life learning experiences are immersed and embedded in the living world because children can embody their mindful encounters with others sentient beings.

In this lens, eco-cultural sustainability education is then "an ecologically interdependent view of the cosmos" (Slattery, 1995, p. 19), whereby cultural "meaning is personally created and historically generated" (Bruner as cited in Doll, 1993, p. 124). Generally, the term "ecology" signifies our collective earthly and cosmic home (Berry, 2009). Specifically, the ecology of childhood is about children's spontaneous, unlearned, and unplanned connections with the natural world (Cobb, 1977; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006). Cobb (1977) explained that these connections are often creative and imaginative expressions of children's playful explorations as well as intricate relationships with others, including other than human species. Further, this ecological way of understanding and knowing helps children develop an "uncommon form of genius which constitutes the high point of achievement in human growth potential" (Cobb, 1977, p. 2). In this view, one's holistic mindfulness of nature allows learners to imagine and construct their eco-cultural sustainability through their free time and mindful self-directed activities.

Methodology

Many ethnographers found that precolonial Tibetan culture was highly artistic and, generally, creative in its diverse forms, representations, rituals, ceremonies, literature, landscape cave-based pictorial art, festivals, and overall popular knowledge (Blavatsky, 1885; Govinda, 1972; G. Roerich, 1931/2003). As well, many local people describe their culture as highly artistic in the religious context

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. of poetic Buddhist literature and everyday life (Trungpa, 2000, 2004). For example, Trungpa (2000) described his childhood memories in his own room at Dudtsi-Til monastery in Nancheng, "There were cupboards all around the walls; the doors were beautifully painted with ornamental designs of flowers, birds, etc., and the general colouring was gold on a red background. . . . There were recesses framed in deeply carved and lacquered wood to hold old and valuable images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and eminent Spiritual Masters" (p. 43). In addition, popular culture was also infused with arts such as folk songs, oral legends, stories, and visual paintings (Govinda, 1972). In fact, cultural histories have been preserved and sustained through these diverse artistic forms of collective wisdom and personal expressions (G. Roerich, 1931/2003). Children used to remember these songs and naturally learn through them about their local wisdom (Tsering Chonphel, 2012). Moreover, the Tibetan land has embodied these arts (e.g., pictorial frescoes) in its various cultural places, sacred spaces, and spiritual grounds (G. Roerich, 1931/2003).

Based on my literature review, I have decided to engage an arts-based methodology in order to respectfully honor and acknowledge this unique cultural and historical context of Tibetan communities. Furthermore, I have also decided to situate myself in the research as a reflexive and reflective artist, researcher, and teacher (e.g., a/r/tographer; Irwin, 2004; Shugurova, 2017). According to Faulkner et al. (2016), "Reflexivity means being aware of and acknowledging the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. It means acknowledging the impossibility of remaining outside of one's subject matter" (p. 198). Therefore, I have decided to deepen an ethical context of my research through my reflexive and culturally sensitive arts-based methodological framework. Reflexivity has allowed me to shape my methodology with attention to my subjectivity in order to "reframe [my] stance as expert to one of learner" (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013, p. 5). This perspective is informed by Freire (1968/1973) and his concept of *cultural synthesis* that aims to empower local people and to give

them voice by learning from them about their lived experience in the world. To me, this way of learning is artistic in my visual and poetic renderings of my learning processes from the local people. According to Berryman, SooHoo and Nevin (2013) culturally responsive researchers should embrace “aesthetic renderings of any aspect of the lived and research experience” (p. 18). Further, the aesthetic process has embodied my reflexivity throughout the research process. Sandelowski and Barroso (2002) wrote, “Reflexivity is a hallmark of excellent qualitative research” (as cited in Ryan, n.d., p. 2). Therefore, a/r/tography allows me to be reflexive as well as to sustain my culturally sensitive approach throughout the research process. A/r/tography is one of the arts-based qualitative methodologies. According to Irwin (2010),

A/r/tography as a research methodology is reflective, reflexive, recursive, and responsive.

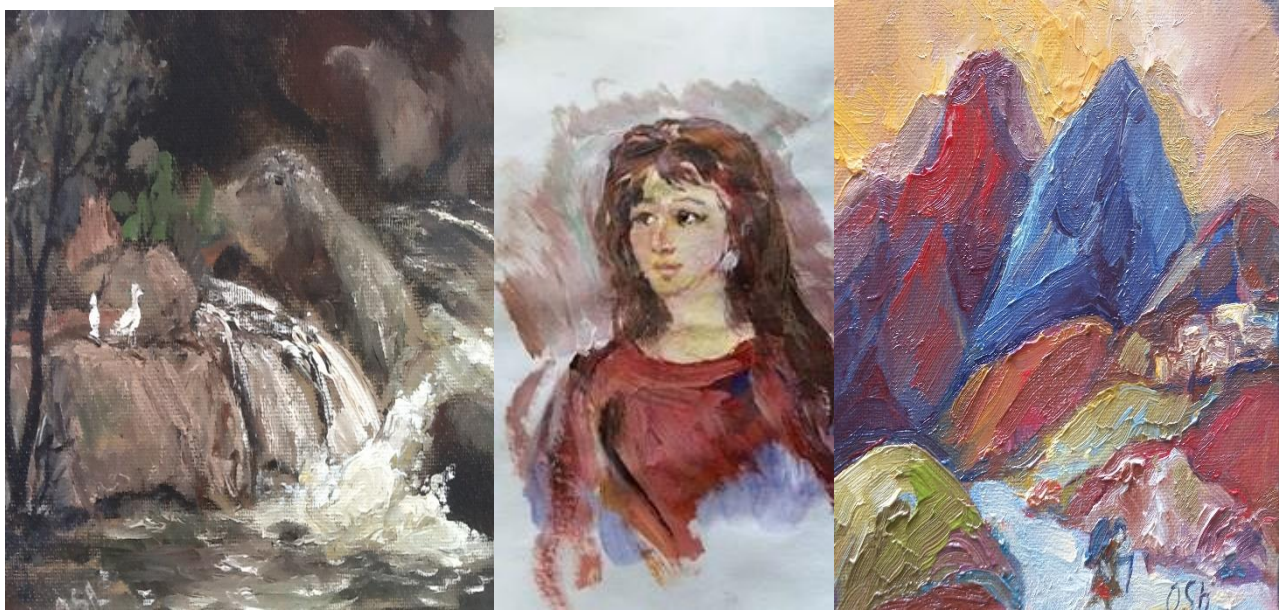
Bringing the arts and graphy (writing text) together, a/r/tography also performs itself by persisting in using forward slashes to represent folds between the broadly conceived identities of artist, researcher, and teacher (educator/learner). These folds are contiguous representations of identities colliding, merging, and separating as the dynamics of a situation are revealed. (p. 43)

Historically, a/r/tography emerged on the basis of a post-structural theory of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). One of the central concepts of this theory is a rhizome that serves as a visionary concept and metaphor of connections and interconnections (Irwin et al., 2006). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) wrote that a rhizome is all about multiplicities; “a rhizome as a subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes” (p. 6). Thinking through and with this concept has allowed me to understand the wisdom of being that is about relations and connections, diversity and difference; rather than dichotomies and dualisms, divisions and hierarchies (Shugurova, 2017). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) eloquently wrote, “The wisdom of the plants, even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings” (p. 11). In this context, my rhizomatic methodological stance invites other sentient being and

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the living world to participate in the research process because rhizomes come from the world in an attempt to imitate it (i.e., an assemblage of ideas, representations, expressions, movements, strata) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Ultimately, this wisdom of interconnectedness resonates with the Buddhist concept of *interbeing* that is a poetic and visionary idea that embodies the intrinsic meaning of human-nature interrelationality, interconnectedness, and interdependency (Bai & Scutt, 2009; Nhat Hanh, 2012). Poetically, *interbeing* invites us to contemplate and map out all of the strata of wisdom that form the layers of meanings in research and in life as well as to acknowledge the wisdom of plants, winds, animals, spirits, and people. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2012) renders this complex meaning of *interbeing* with a simple poetic imaginative vision of a cloud that is residing or resting between these pages,

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees we cannot make paper. . . . So we can say that the cloud and the paper “inter-are.” (p. 55)

I am a poet and a visual artist and I see the *interbeing* of this research and the historical place of Tibet. This place is between these pages and thoughts, emotions and rain, feelings and clouds, sensations and intuitions, space and time, image and word, history and silence. A/r/tography has created this awareness of connections with differences, and deepened my compassionate reflexivity in the visual/poetic context of *interbeing*. The methodological framework also invites readers to feel compassionate connectedness with unknown histories and lived experience. The a/r/tographic *interbeing* is about the research “capacity and ability to sense and feel everything in terms of the bond” (Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009, p. 324). Furthermore, my rhizomatic renderings have further helped me to draw on my identity as an artist/researcher/teacher and my subjective interpretations/understandings from within the heart.



Figures 2. My creative impressions of the Tibetan land with pelicans near a Yarlung Tsangpo waterfall and of my reflexive self-positionality/contiguity with the local communities. Acrylic on canvas on board and paper, May 2017, Fall 2014, Spring 2015.

Furthermore, my data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation processes are rhizomatic resonances and impressions (Irwin et al., 2006). These resonances are my emotions and feelings that have emerged through my artistic practices and poetic reflections. The impressionist resonances create and enhance my methodological space where new meanings and deep understandings can emerge with and through time (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005, p. 903). These impressions are grounded in the historical data that I have collected with the help of a pre-existing oral history database, such as the Tibet Oral History Project (2016-2017). Currently, there are 304 oral histories (i.e., 279 transcripts and 45 videos). For the purposes of this research article, I have chosen 30 transcripts (15 women and 15 men) in order to render their collective experience with a focus on their multiple voices and unique histories. I have rendered them through the main a/r/tographic renderings, such as openings (i.e., poetic impressions), reverberations (i.e., poetic understandings), metaphors and metonymy (i.e., expressed in my visual art and poetics), living inquiry (e.g., theoretical interpretation), contiguity (e.g., passages of visual poetics), and excess (e.g., photographic attention to the unknown contexts and

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encounters with the unknown) (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005). Due to the space limitations of this paper, I mainly focus on openings, reverberations, and living inquiry in order to explore and, possibly, answer my research questions with depths.

Openings

According to Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005), openings create a dynamic passage into an unknown terrain of people's lived experience with the help of senses and text. This passage is a way of knowing that "un/folds, stretches out, and is exposed. It is raw, like the frayed edges of a piece of fabric—threadbare like lace" (p. 905). I have re-created these openings with the help of a collective multiple-voiced poem that invites readers to piece meaning together and to become an active weaver of this intricate and subtle lace of different histories. I have created this poetic with a particular attention to the participants' exact words and emotional expressions. Through these renderings, I begin to explore my research questions.



Figure 3. Tibetan childhood in Sharugon, Tibet. December 1927–January 1928. Courtesy of Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York, NRM archive ref. no: 405071, 405102, 405107.

*

"There were no schools..."

When I was little, my life was like a bliss,

Enjoyment, happiness, and peace

We had our land, home, fields,

Wild pastures, rivers, lakes, and hills

We had a house, made of stones and mud.

. . . I learned from mom, my uncles, aunt

We naturally learned ourselves

We also played all day and tended animals. . .

All our foods came from the fields

We cared for each other, shared our yields

We get to eat from farming, dairying.

We also played by running, skipping, catching.

We made these games ourselves, created them, imagined.

We also liked to swim in rivers, thunder lakes; and always skate!

We played like equals: boys and girls. Tibetans don't discriminate.

The village was my playground, all kids could freely run around.

We played in nature; mud, horns and bones were great for games.

We colored them and carved them into shapes with funny names

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We were completely self-sufficient: we had the lands and our fields,
And pastures, trades; the animals could give us milk and fully feed us.
All kids were happy, not just me...when we were children, we were free.



Figure 4. Tibetan childhood. Shentsa Dzong. March 1928. Courtesy of Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York, Ref. no: 405301.

“Schools were never started there...”

There were no schools you would hear or see in the villages.
Each family had their own education with care and diligence.
When one is young, there is nothing but playing with friends.
As one grows older, one sees their siblings, neighbours, parents.
One can see and learn old traditions from them in the present.
As soon as a child is able to speak, she gets the Tibetan habits:
reciting the prayers like *mani*, *Dolma*, and *benzu guru*.
One doesn't teach, doesn't learn; knowing just happens through
natural ways as blessings from Buddha Dharma, its truth.

Reverberations

In a/r/tography, reverberations are about vibrations that move through the text and image in a creative momentum. According to Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005), reverberations create an “evocation that calls out, asking for a response, a living inquiry, transforming static moments in momentum, multiplying and metamorphosing” (p. 907). Therefore, my reverberations attempt to evoke a new vision and response that may allow readers to reflect on the people’s learning experiences with attention to their historical meanings and understandings. In particular, I poetically render the thematic momentum of life learning contexts that are about children’s creative and free playfulness in a broader context of eco-cultural sustainability.

“What one liked to do most as a child was to play. [Laughs]”

We often made some arrows and a bow;

We placed small bets; created targets in a row.

We also colored vultures’ feathers.

Yes, boys and girls played all together.

*

Fireplace: We made a fireplace with stones, mud, mulch.

We poured pa and tea in leaf-cups; pretended it was lunch.

Some kids pretended to herd sheep, yaks, goats, calves.

Such games were played. We all enjoyed them very much.

There is a pause. Tape change. The interviewee laughs.

*

My parents used to take me to a festival of Cham

Where monks in masks of deer, lion, tigers

Would dance and sing and chant

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We learned from Cham about spirits, gods,
Majestic legends, stories of the past,
Like carnivals. We also felt a part
Of scenes, masks, dances, songs, and chants;
Oh Cham, oh, transformations and creative minds!



Figure 5. Cham festival. Fragment. Acrylic on canvas on board. August 2016.

Living Inquiry: Creative Playfulness, Intergenerational Learning, and Subsistence

Living inquiry has been my methodological process of coming to know the unknown to me experiences through my subjective impressions. According to Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005), living inquiry is “an embodied encounter constituted through visual and textual *understandings and experiences* rather than mere visual and textual *representations* [emphasis in original]” (p. 902). These encounters are constituted through my thematic/theoretical interpretations that are interwoven with the visual understandings in oil, acrylic, and mixed media.



Figure 6. Children are playing outdoors. Acrylic on canvas on board. May 2017.

Creative Playfulness: Successes and Challenges

The local children's ways of life learning were diverse cultural practices that included creative games and household activities (e.g., herding animals). One of the most memorable experiences was their play time (or timelessness and playfulness) outdoors with other mixed-age children, siblings, and animals. Generally, almost all of the interviewees had time and desire to play. For example, Anzi said, "When I was a little, there were many others like me and we used to play" (10M, p. 2). Furthermore, Tashi Samphel recalled

What one liked to do most as a child was to play. [Laughs] One had the wish to play. Q: Yes. One did not stay home and went everywhere to play. There were many other children and [we] ran together all over the place. [We] were so engrossed in playing that [we] would not get lunch. (I39D, p. 4)

Moreover, the interviewees didn't precisely define the meaning of play and playfulness in their childhood because these diverse activities involved various self-invented and self-led games (e.g., apchu/aju; bows and arrows, pretend game, wrestling, tug-of-war); creative ideas; and organic experiences outdoors (e.g., swimming, skating, running around, wandering). These games were highly creative because they were mostly situated in the natural world and involved a lot of imaginative

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. activities with found objects (e.g., stick, mud, stones, pebbles, leaves). For example, apchu game was about a sheep's ankle that the children could color, and use as a transformational toy. With the help of the apchu, local deities were called. Then, the ankle was supposed to represent a horse, sheep, goat, or donkey. These animals symbolized various lucky signs. The children had to throw the apchu in the air and quickly recognize its imaginative transformations into one of the animals. The horse sign was the most fortunate ones to receive in this game. Another fun and happy game was a tug-of-war, in which "the boys would stand on one side and girls would be on the other side. Then [they] pulled at the rope. . . . We played like equals" (Kalsang Yangchen I24, pp. 1–2). Generally, play was definitely a happy time or timelessness of *being* with each other and the sentient world.

Therefore, playfulness may be defined as a continuum of children-led activities that were not structured by adults (Holt, 1970). Precisely, this continuum of experience allows us as educators to understand that "life and human experience, past, present, and future are one whole, every part connected to and dependent on every other part" (Holt, 1970, p. 9). One of the interviewees, Tsering Chonphel described this experience as being *unmindful of time* (I35D) because the children could freely and playfully enjoy the beauty of their places and the natural world. Tsewang Khangsar said,

Your village is like your playground. You can go any place. You can go swim in the river in the summers or play snowball, play with other kids or chase each other or go play with the tricks and mud. We also used to play with the yak horns. Yak horns were great play stuff. They are tough and we also used to play with the ankles. There's a little bone in the ankles of the sheep and goat. Those are collected. They are kind of big toys for us. We color them, we shape them. Kids spent their entire day playing. (I93, p. 7)

It is also interesting to learn from Tenzin Lhagyal about his experience of this continuum,

When I was young, my parents sent me to gather cow dung on the hills. Those of us who went in search of cow dung assembled. When our baskets were full, we came down the hill. When we played on the flat ground. We ate what we had [brought] and then watched the sun and if it was early, we even played near the hills. If it was not very early, we came down to the village, kept the dung basket down and played leisurely until it was almost night. [Laughs] (I20, p. 9)

Often, playfulness was a part of their everyday work-related activities such as herding animals. Even though this playfulness may be perceived as work, children felt happy during these activities. For example, Yeshi Lhadon said, “At the age of 6, my father would send me out to look after the pigs. . . . That was fun because there were many children involved. Yes, we used to play in the mud with the pigs. We would throw water and mud” (I12, p. 5). Norbu shared, “I would be looking after the animals and used to play in the waters and run around. . . we would swim and splash water on each other. Then when we felt cold, we would lay down in the sand” (I10, pp. 1–2). Playfulness has created a spontaneous and happy (i.e., fun, exciting) continuum of childhood experiences that were imagined and constructed by the children themselves.

One of the challenges of this way of learning was that not all children could play as they wished. One of the interviewees, Choekyi (alias) said that she didn’t play because her mother “had the greatest number of children” (I21, p. 1). However, she never felt that she was unhappy, “I do not feel sad about that.” She continued,

That was how it was in the village then and there is no point feeling sorry about it. . . When I was young I used to think that I should be able to complete the work of the day. I never thought about happier times or such. (p. 3)

Intergenerational Learning: Successes and Challenges

For many children, life learning was an intergenerational continuum of experience that allowed them to observe, participate, and engage in local cultural practices. Leidums (2016) wrote that

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intergenerational life learning takes place when "children have regular opportunities to be embedded in the daily social fabric of family and community life, interacting across ages and generations" (p. 2). For example, Norbu said, "My grandmother taught me the field work. My father also taught me" (I10, p. 4). As well, Dawa Dolma shared that she "learned [how to weave] from her mother at a young age" (I77D, p. 4). Actually, all interviewees seemed to learn from their families and communities about various cultural practices, arts, and other social activities. Tsering Chonphel said, "One learned to dance, sing and chant prayers naturally from one's parents, relatives and neighbors" (I35D, p. 4). These experiences seem to be shaped by a sense of natural authority and power (Holt, 1976). Drawing on the works of Dennison, Holt (1976) highlighted the important difference between natural authority and coercive authority, whereby the former "rests on experience, competence, wisdom, and commitment, on the respect, trust, and love of one person for another; and [the latter] rests only on the power to bribe, to threaten, and to punish" (p. 106). Unschooled learning is firmly rooted in the power of natural authority (Holt, 1976; Ricci, 2012). Children are supported to grow and explore the world together *with* their families in the community-based continuum of experience.

Furthermore, this power is shared among all family members because it is intricately interwoven within a cultural fabric and social structure of local knowledge, such as Buddhist beliefs and practices of compassion. Norga noticed that all people could practice Dharma "at one's free will and [without] oppression" (I48D, p. 13). Compassion is a natural power of growth and becoming. Anderson (1995) found that "you can't force the heart. Genuine compassion cannot be imposed from without" (p. 72). Intergenerational life learning emerges from *within* this natural power of compassion. There were no challenges found in this context of life learning because none of the interviewees shared any negative feelings or thoughts about their intergenerational life learning experience. Almost all children felt happy when they were little, or didn't even think whether they

were unhappy or happy for that matter.

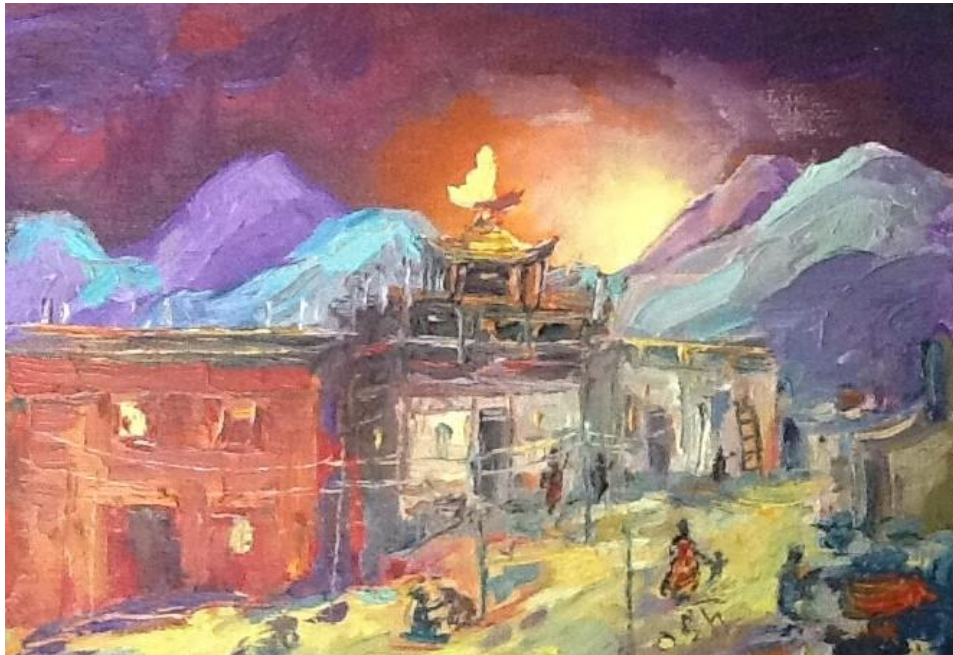


Figure 7. Intergenerational life learning in a local village. Inspired by the archival photos in the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York NRM no.: 405087, 405090, and 405088. Acrylic on canvas on board. Summer 2016-2017.

Subsistence as Eco-Cultural Sustainability: Successes and Challenges

Subsistence was a cultural context of children's learning experience. All interviewees noted that they had led a self-reliant and self-subsistent life. For them, subsistence, sustainability, and self-reliance means the way of being that may be characterized as a natural exchange and reciprocal relationship with each other, domestic animals, and the land in a mutually beneficial process. For example, Yeshi Lhadon said that "there were no schools, but we were totally self-reliant" (I12, p. 4). This means that communities could educate and sustain themselves on their own terms and through their means. Furthermore, Ama Kalden Chama noted, "The agricultural lands sustained us. Then [we] utilized the animals. By weaving the wool of sheep we prepared our own clothes. We were just about self-sufficient. The food came from the fields" (I10C, p. 3). Through natural exchange, farmers could trade their products (e.g., milk, curd, butter) on other products (e.g., grain, meat,

A/r/tography of life learning: A historical perspective on children's lived experience and eco-cultural sustainability of childhood before the advent of compulsory schooling in Tibet. hand-made clothes). As a result, there was an absence of poverty as such. Communities have tried to support and sustain each other in order to practice the Buddhist values and principles of compassion. In this context, life learning has been embedded in the culture of subsistence and, therefore, shaped by its values, activities, and practices. Clearly, children's ways of learning had an implicit purpose of being and becoming subsistent and sustainable in order to preserve an intricate human-nature balance between human communities and other invisible/visible sentient beings. Therefore, the major success of learning in this context of subsistence was primarily about a broader eco-cultural development of local sustainability on a micro-scale of children's household and a macro-scale of communities/villages.

Generally, subsistence and sustainability don't have the same meaning in various indigenous communities worldwide (Cajete, 1994; Holthaus, 2008). Holthaus (2008) explains, "For indigenous peoples subsistence means direct, personal engagement with land and sea and the recognition of humans' dependence on the land for energy, nourishment, tools, and household goods" (p. 69). Also sustainability encompasses people's economy (e.g., household farmland) and modes of production (i.e., agriculture, nomadic practices, farming/herding). Hence, sustainability doesn't necessarily entail subsistence.

Furthermore, Holthaus (2008) found that modern school systems have been "determined agents for the erosion and eventual loss" of subsistence (p. 74). In this critical perspective, one of the major challenges of subsistent life learning is compulsory schooling. Tibetan ways of subsistent life learning and being have been systematically destroyed with the ongoing colonization and its various mechanisms, such as colonial compulsory schooling, since the 1950s (Shugurova, 2017). Specifically, local children were forcefully separated from their families. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mandated that children had to be sent to China; "every family who had two or three children" (Yeshe Wangdu, 178, p. 6). There were severe punishments, such as torture and violence,

of those who had refused to follow the mandate. Some of the children thought that schools were fun. Of all interviews, there were only five people who said relatively positive comments about schools. Actually, Chinese armies purposefully wanted to deceive people in order to present schools as something naturally good for them. For example, Kalsang Yulgial said that he could intuitively feel this deception and trick,

They teach Chinese. They teach math. They teach geography and then Tibetan as well. I guess they started teaching Russian alphabet also. Yeah, we were soon. . . we found out that the. . . this was not a really good trick to be in Chinese school. So we sort of by kind of sensing that we are being separated from Tibetan. . . from families then we try to escape from the Chinese class, you know. [Laughs]. (I30C, p. 10)

Moreover, schools were often used as labour camps (e.g., commune schools) where children and their families were sent to become slaves and to work every day without any food. One of the participants shared, “there was nothing taught in school. One must work. The school for the children was just in name and not a letter of the alphabet was taught” (Jangchuk Nyima (alias), I41D, p. 11). It also important to note that this forced social changes have caused mass starvation and deaths of thousands of people. The commune starvation continued till 1964. In 1970, CCP allowed these “school” prisoners to herd animals, such as sheep. The sheep helped many communities to recover from their conditions and to survive with the help of butter, cheese, and milk.

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Figure 8. A local village in the trans-Himalayas. Acrylic on canvas on board, Summer 2017.

Conclusion

My concluding research question is: “What might we, as educators, interested in alternative education and unschooling, learn from these unique experiences about children's ways of natural learning and their historical significance?” I think that these experiences allow us to contemplate the historical significance of life learning experience in children's lives with respect to cultural diversity and ecological sustainability. Children should be allowed freedom and independence in all their meaning-making activities, such as creative play and intergenerational learning (and other self-directed experiences), because these ways of learning lead children to develop a strong connection with their families, communities, and the natural world. Through these developments, children become intrinsically motivated on the basis of compassion, trust, kindness, respect, and love (Ricci, 2012). Moreover, life learning takes place in the living world whereby all children have multiple opportunities to creatively understand and critically reflect on their being *with* others. This place of connection and compassion (i.e., interbeing) shapes a child's sense of eco-cultural sustainability and, consequently, subsistence. At the heart of this place and process is children's right to learning and education whereby

they can happily and freely develop their way of being, worldview, and vision of the world that they want to live in, co-create, and sustain. In this historical context, teachers and educational policies of inclusive education and education for sustainability worldwide should embrace non-compulsory life learning and a broader learner-centered democratic paradigm in order to move forward and toward true childhood happiness, freedom, and eco-cultural sustainability.

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