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Tales and Haiku as Pedagogical Strategies to Enhance Empathy For Living Beings and Care for Nature of Future Early Childhood Educators

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Abstract

From an early age, children are curious about plants and animals, and the way they move, feed, and select their habitats. This affinity is known as biophilia. However, although people are in contact with nature, they rarely take the time to contemplate the beauty of landscapes and ecosystems and communicate the sensations they experience with elements of the natural environment, such as air and rain. The use of tales and poems as teaching tools that connect literature and science, favours learning about environmental issues in young children. In this context, this work aims to share the teaching experiences of two elective courses taught to future early childhood educators. The first course, "Biophilia and children's tales", aimed to familiarize students with short tales created by Chilean authors in the last two decades, with native plants and animals as main characters. The second course, "Nature and haiku", aimed to introduce students to the knowledge of this type of Japanese poetry and their respective haiga. In both courses, students participated in literary workshops, where they initially talked about the readings and the main aspects that captured their attention. Later, the stories and poems created by the students were analysed and discussed. Students' primary interests were the ecology and behaviour of living beings, the biodiversity of plants and animals, environmental crises generated by human action, and sustainable development. In their opinion, this activity allowed them to develop their creativity and artistic expression. From the systematization of both pedagogical strategies, two books with the students' creations were published. These texts will be used as a means to transmit and promote love, respect, and care for nature and the different forms of life to the children they will educate in the future.

Keywords: *Biophilia, Living Beings, Nature, Landscapes, Tales, Haiku*

1. Introduction

From an early age, human beings are in contact with nature and show empathy towards it. Specifically, young children develop an innate affiliation with other living organisms. They are curious about locomotion, feeding, and habitat selection behaviours exhibited by animals and plants, known as biophilia [1, 2]. This behaviour, as all the characteristics of the phenotype of an organism, has a genetic and an environmental component [3]. Because of the latter, teaching methodologies should promote the development of the scientific thinking skills and interests that allow children to enjoy and explore nature. Although children at this age can explore and recognize plants and animals in their environment, they tend to consider nature as a static entity, free of human intervention. It is essential to change this type of misconceptions so that children build an adequate image of the world that surrounds them and of the environmental problems they will face in their adult life, fostering attitudes and motivation about how to investigate and learn science. In Chile, a number of editorials have published children's tales created by national authors in the last two decades. The main characters of these stories are native plants and animals immersed in natural landscapes, connected to the culture of indigenous communities. In this way, it is possible to identify that the tales constitutes a teaching and learning strategy to promote respect and care for different life forms.

As human beings, we are frequently in contact with nature. Still, we rarely take the time to contemplate the beauty of flora, fauna, landscapes, and ecosystems, and communicate to others the sensations we experience with elements of the natural environment, such as air and rain. Since the end of the 15th century, Japanese haiku poetry has recorded the astonishment and emotion that the perception of natural phenomena, such as the change of seasons and the spiritual connection that people achieve in their daily tasks, produces in the poet [4]. The haiku is a poetic composition consisting of three verses of five, seven, and five syllables, respectively. In general, the structure of these poems consists of a word that directly or indirectly evokes a season of the year (kigo) that frequently appears in the first verse, a cutting term or separator (kireji) present in the second verse, and an idea or latent image in the third verse [5]. A complement to these poems is a painting that does not seek perfection (haiga) that accompanies the haiku. There are valuable experiences that show how young children between the ages of 6 and 12 can build haiku that teach us about their capacity

for observation and their feelings [6]. In addition, the use of haiku has begun to be explored as a teaching strategy for young children to observe nature, the complexity, and beauty of the objects that are part of our physical environment, the passing of the seasons, and the behaviour of plants and animals [7].

This work aims to share the experience of two elective courses, *Biophilia and children's tales* and *Nature and haiku*, taught as part of an Early Childhood Education Bachelor degree. The tales course aimed to familiarize the students with the flora and fauna present in our country through short stories created by Chilean writers. This will allow the children receiving these stories to understand nature as a dynamic entity subject to human intervention. This learning would facilitate in children the construction of an adequate image of living beings and the physical world that surrounds them and of the environmental problems they will face during their adult life. On the other hand, the poetry course aimed to introduce students to the knowledge and generation of haiku poems, which will serve them both to develop their literary interests and implement this type of activity in the classroom during their work with children.

2. Pedagogical experiences

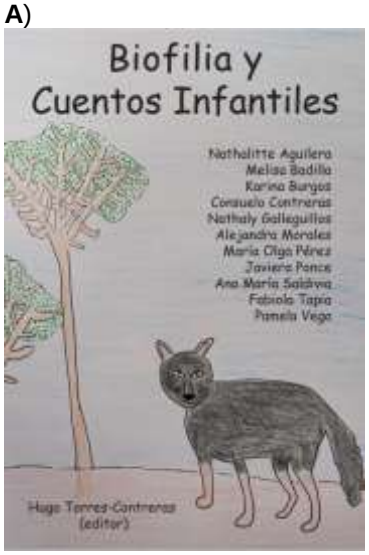
During the 2020 autumn semester, the elective course *Biophilia and children's tales* was taught, under the modality of a literary workshop, in which texts that had to be read by the students were assigned week by week. In a round table format, some fragments of these texts were narrated in each session, and the aspects that captured the students' attention were analysed. After presenting examples of native plants and animals, at the end of class, the students were motivated to create and write their own stories. In the 2021 autumn semester, the *Nature and haiku* elective course was taught, which was approached similarly, emphasizing that at the end of each class, the students shared their haiku and haiga based on suggestions of abiotic and biotic elements from nature on which to focus. All student work was collected at the end of both courses and considered their opinions based on teaching evaluation questionnaires.

3. Findings

In the *Biophilia and children's tales* course, the main aspects that captured the attention of the students corresponded to characteristics of form, function, and behaviour of living beings; biodiversity of invertebrates, vertebrates, plants, and trees present in Chile; types of habitat in which flora and fauna are distributed; competitive or cooperative relationships that the protagonists of the stories can establish with each other; and the bond between humans and the rest of the living beings. The tales created are diverse. Some of the topics are sunflowers, *Nothofagus* forests, insects (butterflies, beetles), birds (Andean condor, owl, parrot, small passerine), mammals (dog, cat, fox, whale, orca, dolphin, *Dromiciops* marsupial, Octodontidae rodent, Andean hairy armadillo, bat), children and the sun. This literary activity was compiled and synthesized in a book (see Figure 1a), and what this experience represented for the students is reflected in the following comments:

> "I enjoyed creating my own stories and listening to the tales created by my classmates" (Student 1)
>
> "The course had a rich learning environment and interactions" (Student 2)
>
> "This was a continuous opportunity for learning and allowed my creative process to flourish" (Student 3)

A)



B)

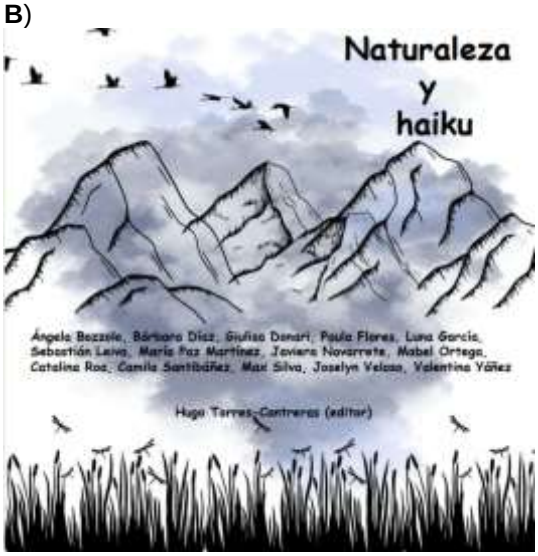


Figure 1. Cover of the books that compiled the works carried out by the students in the elective courses of *Biophilia and children's tales* (**A**) and *Nature and haiku* (**B**).

In the *Nature and haiku* course, the students learned about classic Japanese haiku authors (Basho, Busson, Issa), women´s participation in this type of poetry (Sachiko, Chie, Masajo), and the potential of haiku for young children to learn about natural sciences. In addition, the students were surprised by the possibility of building poems and haigas from the contemplation, connection, and experiences they established with the surrounding environment. The main elements from which the students constructed their poems corresponded to clouds, leaves, mountains, wind, sea, birds, trades, home, and childhood. The haigas they used to complement their haiku consisted of drawings, paintings, photographs, or collages. In the same way, this didactic material was compiled and systematized in a book (see Figure 1b), and what this experience meant for the students is portrayed in the following comments:

> "This has been a course that has entertained me a lot, because of both readings that helped me in the haikus creation and artistic expression through my graphite drawings [...] turning out to be an oasis in the stress and anxiety that the university is during pandemic times" (Student 4)
>
> "I learned a lot about poetry and managed to develop artistic aspects that I thought I could never achieve" (Student 5)
>
> "By far the best course I've had in my time at university […] an excellent experience where we created a trusting environment to share our creations and talk, overcoming virtual barriers. Every Friday, it was a pleasure to attend classes" (Student 6)

4. Discussion

The students think that this type of elective course, which links literature and science, allowed them to stimulate their creative abilities, and they valued, especially, that each person´s interests and styles were taken into account to carry out this process. In addition, the students highlighted their commitment and dedication during the semester of the course, since they invested time and energy in creating each text with great care and motivation. The students treasure the instances of online conversation and interaction that arose from sharing their tales and poems, because they feel it enriched their professional development and had a personal therapeutic effect that allowed them to cope better with the COVID-19 pandemic period. On the other hand, the tales and haiku gathered in both books, constitute a didactic material that can be used to teach key natural science concepts [8, 9] and cross-cutting contents that caught young children´s attention, for example, through drawings, drama, and music. Finally, these writings should motivate other early childhood education students to discover their literary interests early -based on experiences- and be encouraged to write for their students.

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