

## **Gardens as strategic spaces for environmental education: epistemology, connection, justice**

Gardens have a growing importance in urban areas as they function as part of the green urban infrastructure, and provide access to natural areas. Traditional uses of gardens include recreation and contemplation, whereas more contemporary uses include environmental education, biodiversity conservation and reconnection with nature. Private gardens pose an access difficulty due to the existence of entrance fees, likewise, community and home gardens are also classed in the sense that they require land, time and money to be maintained. Who has access to, and whose ways of interacting with these green spaces count, is seldomly discussed in the literature. Also lacking is discussion on the assumption that gardens are a good representation of natural environments. Few pieces of literature engage in the historical aspects of gardens as enclosed curated spaces designed for utilitarian human purposes. Another aspect seldomly discussed, is that using gardens as part of formal education has had an oppressive history towards indigenous populations, immigrants, and women. Indian boarding schools for example, used western gardening as an attempt to disconnect people from land, community and spiritual practices. Scholars in education have associated teachers with gardeners who plants seeds in a fertile soil (the knowledge in the minds of young children) that will grow under their care. This association emphasizes a delivery model of education, and the garden is relegated to a living metaphor to connect to ideas rooted in institutions and colonialism, rather than to connect to the earth, nature, and spirit as indigenous cultures do. Nevertheless several academic and activists movements engage in gardening, assuming the garden as nature and nature as teacher, including gardening as a educational and spiritual practice. In this session I will discuss and engage the audience in a reflection about how gardens can be used as a liberating educational tool, using holistic and critical approaches to how we see them, what counts as nature and how gardens can mediate our relationship to knowledge, to other species and to spiritual practices.