Nonviolent Companionship with Nature:
High School Students' Pathways

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Received August 2025
Accepted for publication March 2026
Published May 2026

Abstract

In this collaborative teacher research project, two high school teachers and a teacher educator explore what nonviolent companionship with nature means for two groups of students who engaged in eight weeks of interactions with nature near their schools. Theoretically oriented by nonviolence theory, the researchers adopted an emergent research design in which students were free to choose their own nature companions and interacted with them while researchers followed the unfolding of these students' pathways. Two major findings from each group—a sense of belonging and whole-being learning—converged to convey the integrative capacities of nonviolence education.

Keywords: *ecological sustainability, teacher research, nonviolence education, companionship with nature, high school curriculum*

Introduction

Companionship with nature—where humans and the natural world exist in mutually beneficial relationships and care for one another—has long been part of human history (Fruehauf, 1936; Ochona, 2024; Talukder, 2014; Upham Woods Committee, 1951). The word "companionship" indicates the refusal to objectify nature and turns othering into togetherness. The Asian tradition of companionship with nature is neither humanity-centered nor nature-centered, but develops mutual bonds between the two (Talukder, 2014). Educational attention to human/nature interconnectedness historically includes Rousseau's naturalistic education and Montessori's holistic education (Montessori, 1946; Rousseau, 1911) During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, social distancing, working at home, and travel restrictions reduced traditional forms of contact with nature, although the negative effects of human control of the natural world were also reflected in the reduction in pollution when human productivity decreased (Poindexter, et al., 2021). The efforts to slow down to appreciate natural surroundings in one's place (Alvarez, 2026; Hunter-Lych et al., 2023; Soga et al., 2021) or use artistic means to interact with nature from a distance enhanced modes of humanity/nature interrelatedness (Hunter-Lynch et al., 2023).

An increased public ecological awareness

emerged during and after COVID-19 (Basile et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2023; Rousseau & Deschacht, 2020). In these explorations, the human/nature relationship is seldom termed as nonviolent companionship. The nature of relationship, however, is important to specify in order to achieve mutually beneficial interactions between humanity and the planet (Hershock, 2012). An orientation of nonviolent companionship positions the human relationship with nature as non-possessive and non-exploiting, and challenges the taken-for-granted mechanism of excessive human control over the environment (Wang, 2024). Wang (2018) uses the term of "nonviolent companionship with nature" as an option for experiential nonviolence education projects for students in teacher education, and the collection of students' writings on that project was published in a book (Wang & Flory, 2026).

This nonviolent companionship orientation is an important thread of Wang's (2024) nonviolence education theory, which involves multiple dimensions of self-self, self-other, and self-nature relationships. This theory integrates international wisdom of interconnectedness, Gandhi-King philosophies of nonviolent social change, psychoanalytic, post-structural, and feminist perspectives to conceptualize the positive force of nonviolence as the everyday practices of education in an ongoing process of inner and outer work. Experiential learning of forming companionship with nature provides one unique pathway to open students' eyes to the landscape of connectedness. As nonviolence is often a null curriculum that is not discussed and thus excluded from school curriculum, it is important to integrate it into school experience. Our study is oriented by Wang's nonviolence education theory.

Furthermore, while there are some empirical studies of students/nature relationships at the level of early childhood and elementary education (Otto & Pensini, 2017; Sobel, 2022), there are fewer studies at the high school level, particularly naming the relationship as nonviolent has not been found. While Wang and Flory's book (2026) highlights students' work, they are graduate students—mostly in-service teachers—and further studies at K-12 school level are necessary. Focusing on the particular orientation of nonviolent relationships between students and the natural world can shed light on how teachers can create conditions for students to experience nature in a sustainable and non-controlling manner.

In this study, two high school teachers and one teacher educator conducted a collaborative teacher inquiry (Dana & Yenhol-Hoppey, 2020) on students' nonviolent companionship with nature over an eight-week engagement. Teachers' observations along with informal conversations with students, students' journals each week, and teachers' own research journals were the primary data. The research team met before, during, and after the project to share data, discuss emergent themes, and adjust the research by responding to what had emerged. Both students' companionship projects and teacher inquiry were open to what emerged, consistent with the nonviolent orientation, which does not set a predetermined path.

In this paper, we first discuss our theoretical orientation of nonviolence and the methodology of collaborative teacher inquiry. Second we lay out the thematic analysis of each teacher, and summarize intersecting themes. Based upon the findings, we also discuss the limitations and implications of this study.

A Nonviolence Education Theory: Orienting the Study

Nonviolence studies as a field is relatively new (Nagler, 2004) and it is unique in its foundation on interdependence and interconnectedness,

rather than on an individual basis for human rights in the Western peace studies framework (Wang, 2024). There are different layers of nonviolence and education, from individual inner nonviolence to social nonviolence and nonviolence towards the planet, integrating the self and the other (including the non-human other) for mutual flourishing (Hershock, 2012; Nagler, 2004; Sethia, 2014). In the field of curriculum studies, there has emerged a few key texts on nonviolence (Pinar, 2025; Wang, 2014, 2024; Ying, Smythe, & Williams, 2026), and Hongyu Wang (2010, 2014, 2024) has formulated nonviolence as an educational concept and practice since 2010, emphasizing the intertwined motions of dissolving violence and promoting compassion, in which relationship with nature is an organic part.

Wang's (2014, 2024) nonviolence education theory centers on nonviolent relationality and integrates Nagler's (2004, 2010) perspectives in nonviolence studies, Gandhi-King approaches, Butler's (2021) feminist mobilization of nonviolence as a force, Pinar's autobiographical and subjectivity inquiry (1994, 2025), international wisdom of *ubuntu* (Le Grange, 2019; Tutu, 1999) and Daoism (Wang, 2021), and post-structuralist theory of difference (Derrida, 1990) to elaborate a complicated, non-instrumental, and process-oriented educational engagement. Central to this theory are the bridges between the body and the mind, the inner and outer work, and the self and the other beyond dualistic divisions. The design of this experiential learning of "nonviolent companionship with nature" is more than about environmental education, but embodies efforts to build these bridges through holding both difference and relationality. As humanity is profoundly connected with nature while nature is qualitatively different from humanity, building connections through difference promises to allow students to experience embodied learning, achieve self-understanding, foster a sense of belonging that welcomes others.

Oriented by Wang's nonviolence education framework, teacher inquiry is the matching methodology for this study as it not only reveals everyday practices of education but it is also conceptualized in an open-minded and emergent process (Dana & Yenhol-Hoppey, 2020; Shagoury & Power, 2012). Modifying the project of nonviolent companionship with nature as a sustained engagement assignment for graduate students in teacher education (Wang & Flory, 2026), this collaborative teacher inquiry in two high schools invited students to choose a natural companion and interact with it every week to experience the relationships on their own terms. There were no preset learning outcomes so the project was not an imposition but an invitation to learning in emergence, and the study was open to what experiential engagement could lead students to. In this teacher inquiry project, high school students were encouraged to listen to the different "language" of nature (Bankston, 2026) and interact with nature. The focus was on experiencing rather than intellectualizing weather, plants, animals, etc., as nonviolence education is a lived, whole-person oriented, and emergent approach.

Nonviolence education and holistic education converge at the intersection of pursuing integrative personhood and compassionate relationships as well as seeking meaning and purpose for teachers and students (Miller, 2019; Nagler, 2004). Educating the whole person, healing the fragmentations within the person and between the person and nature, and promoting the interconnectedness of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and ecological well-being are shared concerns (Miller, 2019; Smythe, 2024). For high school students, who

are in the process of self-formation, nonviolent companionship with nature provides a holistic opportunity to experience connections and deepen self-understanding.

Methodology

Settings

Two high school teachers in a midwestern state joined in the inquiry, along with a teacher educator. Teacher 1 is a math teacher from a public charter school, Park Academy, and Teacher 2 is an environmental science teacher from a public school, Creek High School. Here two schools' names and student participants' names are pseudonyms due to the need to keep confidentiality.

Park Academy is located near a downtown area, and Teacher 1 chose a nearby park as the natural setting for students. Park Academy serves diverse students, which include LGBTQ students and students with disabilities. Over 50% of students in the school live below the poverty line,with a large proportion having family histories intertwined with the criminal justice system and discriminatory experiences based on race and immigration status. Ten student participants joined the project, including six who identify as nonbinary, transgender, or queer. In this context, Teacher 1 sought to highlight the potential for inner nonviolence in students' companionship with nature. In the project, students went to the park once a week for 30 minutes for eight weeks, beginning February 27, 2025 and ending May 23, 2025 (skipping bad weather weeks). Once in the park, students selected a specific location marked by a non-human companion, such as a tree or a goose's nest, to visit over the course of the project. Each session, students returned to their selected location and documented their observations of the natural environment and their own responses in their journal.

At Creek High School, initially 17 students participated in the study; 12 completed the project. This high school is in a more rural area, and Teacher 2 chose an open green space with a footbridge over a drainage creek. Students met outside once a week for 30 minutes for eight weeks from February 27, 2025, to May 1, 2025 (not counting one week of Spring Break). Students explored the area along the creek bank or the green space on either side of the bridge. Since Teacher 2 teaches environmental science, she was initially interested in students' experiences in weather changes.

Collaborative Teacher Inquiry

When the two teachers read about the project of nonviolent companionship with nature assignment in a graduate class taught by the teacher educator in the Fall semester of 2024, they became greatly interested in implementing it with their high school students. They formed a research team with the teacher educator to conduct a collaborative teacher inquiry in the Spring semester of 2025.

The two teachers took a class in the Spring 2025 on curriculum of nonviolence with the teacher educator and read class materials related to nonviolence theories, mindfulness, and nonviolent pedagogy as they were conducting this research project. Textbooks for that class included Cunningham's (2021) *Archetypal Nonviolence*, Thich Nabt Hanh's (2021) *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet,* and Wang's (2024) *Awakenings to the Calling of Nonviolence in Curriculum Studies*. Te Maiharoe, Ligaliga and Devere's (2022) book. *Decolonising Peace and Conflict Studies through Indigenous Research,* and Tinoco's (2025), *Heart at the Center: An Educator's Guide to Sustaining Love, Hope and Community through Nonviolent Pedagogy* were optional texts. In addition, there were a few online readings related to nonviolence studies. These two

teachers, as you will see later, have incorporated these theories into their work.

This class had an experiential project assignment and nonviolence companionship with nature was one of the choices; the other two were mindfulness for inner nonviolence and nonviolent relationships with the indigenous traditions in Oklahoma. Teacher 1 chose to do the project of mindfulness for inner nonviolence, and she commented later in this paper how mindfulness practice helped her inner work and she introduced a brief practice into her nonviolent companionship project with participating students. This demonstrates how the inner nonviolence and the outer work of teaching were united in her project. Teacher 2 chose nonviolent companionship with nature as the assignment, which combined her coursework with this teacher inquiry project.

As Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020) points out, "Collaborative teacher inquiry builds collaborative teacher efficacy" (p. 88), in which teachers think their contributions make a positive difference in students' lives. They also identify four modes of collaboration, one of which is shared inquiry where the teachers share an interest in a common topic, and "conduct a single teacher research project together" (p. 89). This study used shared inquiry to conduct the study. The three team members in this process of collaborative inquiry met bi-weekly, either on Zoom or in person. During and after students' engagement, the team examined the two data sets, discussed the themes as they emerged, and made adjustments to guiding the students' exploration throughout the process. The writing of this article was also collaborative, with both divisions and collaboration in an iterative process.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research team obtained permission from the two schools and the IRB approval at the teacher educator's university in the Fall of 2024. In November, 2024 the two teachers sent recruitment flyers to potential students, and with their parents' consent, students signed up for the projects in January 2025. All student participants were expected to keep a journal to record their thoughts, feelings, and responses during or after the companionship time. The two teachers kept research journals and recorded their naturalistic observations of students' activities and their informal conversations with students; they also collected the students' journals after each companionship time.

Teacher 1 recruited participants through a tight knit AP Statistics class, hoping the existing strong relationships would ease students' entrance into the project. She introduced the mantras of Dr. Larry Ward that focus on positive encouragement (Hanh, 2021, p. 289-290). During the project, she engaged in eight-week mindfulness practices herself, with an emphasis on breathwork and nonjudgemental observation. She introduced and encouraged these mindfulness practices in her students, beginning with accessible and clearly guided practices like body scans, and eventually introducing practices like visualization meditation. While Teacher 1 intentionally brought mindfulness into the project, Teacher 2 brought her subject area—environmental science—into the project by encouraging students to write about the experience of what they felt and observed while outside.

When Teacher 2 undertook this research, she intended to let the process itself provide direction and to allow the students the freedom to experience the outdoors without defined rules. Originally, Teacher 2 hadn't planned on assigning them any prompts or guidelines for journal writing. However, in casual conversations, several of the student participants had remarked about the

weather differences in March, which caused the teacher's attention. When it was a rainy day, Teacher 2 decided to allow the students to find a quiet place within the school building where they could see the rain falling outside. One month into the study, the project was moved indoors because of heavy rains. It was then that Teacher 2 gave them another optional prompt: "How does the rain affect you? What's your mood? Does it change your mood?." After the rain at the beginning of March, April brought warmth and the landscape shifted. Teacher 2 remarked on the transition and suggested to the students that they could write about what they noticed as the plants began to wake up after winter and how they might also be conflicted because of the allergies that follow the pollen. These comments and prompts were directly related to the subject of environmental science the teacher was teaching.

> Throughout the process, Teacher 2 offered optional prompts based upon students' comments or conversations and the changes in the environment, but students had the freedom to observe and write upon their own choices. Teacher 2 also brought an optional prompt according to what emerged as her interest. Right before the 3rd week, Teacher 2 heard something in a podcast that was intriguing, and decided to ask the students a question to consider. The question was: "The word "discipline" is rooted in the word "disciple", which means student or learner. As you all have undertaken this task as disciples of nature, what are you noticing today as you are writing? Are you noticing anything different?"

For the two teacher researchers, the doubled role of teacher and researcher required both participation and research distance, as well as collaboration with the teacher educator. The data analysis was the result of the research team's collaborative inquiry. Teachers noticed emergent patterns during the process, and, after data collection, the team met twice to discuss how to analyze each teacher's collected data including what they have discovered and students' journals. In addition, the teacher educator also met with two teachers individually to examine the emergent patterns and themes. Since the two teachers' focus was not entirely the same, in the next section we discuss the findings of each teacher separately and then bring them together using the lens of nonviolent companionship.

This research had Oklahoma State University's IRB approval and two schools' permissions, and all students' names appeared in data analysis were pseudonyms to protect their identities. Although each school's setting is discussed below, two schools' names are also pseudonyms.

Findings

Teacher 1: *Seeking Belonging in Mindful Companionship with Nature*

Teacher 1 saw belonging emerge as an important theme in the middle of the project as students described a sense of solace following time in the park, often in contrast with feelings of discomfort expressed when describing their place at home or in a classroom. With this recognition, she introduced the mantra of "Stand up in the house of belonging" (Hanh, 2021, p. 289) . Recognizing the stress of "thwarted belonging" (Bluth et al., 2023, p. 275), which is essential in working with students at the high school level, she found that the self-acceptance and internal sense of belonging that were developing among students during the project, helped lessen their need for external validation. Students' experiencing feelings of connectedness to an environment free of "contemporary. . . anthropogenic influence" (Landres et al., 1998, p. 44) opened the door for self-affirmation in belonging. After three sessions, Lauren (2025) wrote in her journal, "It was nice to

sit outside. Reminds me that I can do nice things when I'm alone. I don't have to be sad. I can go outside and observe." Rachel (2025) said[1], "Observing by myself made me focus on what I was seeing, instead of who was seeing me" (In Conversation with Teacher).

Teacher 1 also noticed that over the course of the project, students transitioned from passively sitting outside to eventually volunteering their own epiphanies in conversations and journals. Moreover, in the second half of the project, students began to become more focused on their experience in nature as its own event, rather than as an alternative to being in a stuffy classroom. Students wrote that their thoughts became more introspective and focused much more on how they were feeling. Discussing her newly found contemplation, Lauren (2025) said, "It's given me more time to reflect on my decisions and how I feel about them. It lets me understand myself more and what I want to do with myself in the future" (In Conversation with Teacher). In other words, they developed more self-awareness as they related to nature.

Belonging via Personal Acceptance

Students formed companionship with various elements of nature—a pond, an oak tree, a pack of geese—reflecting on their own emotions and thoughts. Their sense of belonging grew from a lack of social judgment and a lack of expectations in their interactions with nature. Thomas (2025) said, "I'm not worried about how I look when I'm outside. I know the ducks aren't going to care. I'm not worried they're going to talk behind my back." When asked if they felt judged in the school space, Thomas replied, "I'm not even sure. It just seems like it might be happening, and that freaks me out." This perceived and unverified sense of dread was a common theme in these participants' discussion of the classroom versus outdoors, even though students were with their peers during the entire time outdoors.

Bluth et al. (2023) write, "Self-compassion has been shown to be inversely related to thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicide attempts and ideation in both cisgender adults and LGBTQ youth" (p. 275). Though Park Academy is recognized by students as a safe place, the outdoors provided a sense of acceptance without a need for any social performance. Lauren (2025) explained, "I'm lucky that our school is so welcoming to queer kids like me, but I still feel a weird pressure to fit in with everyone else. I feel welcomed by the outdoors even though I don't really do anything to help the park grow" (In Conversation with Teacher). Teacher 1 saw a connection begin to form between students' understanding of self-nonviolence and their experiencing of nature.

Teacher 1 was practicing mindfulness regularly during the project time and she established a consistent sense of mindfulness through intentional practices, in which the desire for control was transformed into a sense of interdependence (Teacher 1, 2025). Teacher 1 had a fear of danger that was rooted in a lack of control, similar to the students' fear of being mocked by others. To break down this hypervigilance in students, Teacher 1 soon implemented a body scan protocol at the beginning and end of the weekly sessions. Students began to recognize the physical manifestation of their concern—tight shoulders, short breaths, and constantly scanning eyes. This practice helped students enter the park with a relaxed physical presence, opening the gate for a more deliberate engagement with the natural world.

While practicing mindfulness gave students a vocabulary for describing their experiences,

[1] All the student quotes are from their journals, except those from conversations with the teacher, which are indicated as "In Conversation with Teacher."

nature facilitated the evolution of their reflection. Marking their emotional change from classroom to nature, Rachel (2025) wrote, “The sun and wind eased me. In the classroom I feel very over-stimulated versus outside”. The natural setting, removed from the environment of academic and social expectations, promoted a sense of awareness. Lauren (2025) commented on this newfound sense of “ease” by stating “Meditation was easier to get into after going outside. It hasn’t super helped my feelings but [being]outside and the meditations were welcome momentary distractions” . The time in nature was fleeting, but the skills fostered through non-controlling companionship, including personal reflection and self-awareness, were recognized by students as they coped with stressors outside of project time.

Belonging via Inherent Connection

Several students expressed a sense of inherent comfort outside, with Peter (2025) even joking that he “felt connected to his caveman roots” (Conversation with Teacher). Connections between humanity and nature are found in cultures around the world (Soga & Gaston, 2025, p. 2), and studies highlight that the psychological reactions to deliberate interaction with nature are linked to a lowered sense of depression and anxiety (Takayama et al., 2014, p. 7225). The experiencing of nature initially sparked students’ focus on its difference from the classroom. For Maya (2025), “it was nice to have a break from the stuffy classroom air, in exchange for a nice breeze” .

Students mentioned the warm sun compared to the fluorescent lights, the smell of the grass instead of the stench of sweat in an un-airconditioned building, and the sounds of birds rather than the stomping of middle schoolers on the floor above. Liam, a student, wrote, “It’s nice to be able to just sit in silence. It’s a change of pace from all the scurrying of the rest of school” (Liam, personal communication, 2025). Interestingly, many of the students described the outdoors as “silent” or “quiet” even while acknowledging the sounds of animals, the wind, and the splashing of water by the ducks in the pond. This observation indicates both that the students’ concept of noise was that it is man-made, in the classroom with its particular pressures and expectations, and that the concept of noise can be more psychological than sensory.

Belonging via Reduced Access to Technology

The body scan mindfulness practices students tried while sitting with their selected companion invited a disconnection from technology through the simple act of closing their eyes. A major thread that emerged in students’ journals and informal conversations was both their joy in being away from technology and their struggle with limited social media. Social media allows messaging and communication, but is also a source of stress with the possibility of cyberbullying enhanced by anonymity or false identities online (Kim et al., 2023, p. 5). The first three nature sessions were marked by participants’ appreciation of quietness in thoughts, but they also experienced boredom and anxiety. Students expressed concern over “missing something” while being away from their phones (Danielle in conversation with teacher, 2025). After each outside session, Teacher 1 took an informal verbal poll about how students felt about being without their phones. As the weeks went on, the general consensus evolved from a fear of missing out to a joy in not having to think about the potential activity on the phone.

Companionship with nature meets students’ need for relationality in a unique way. Liam (2025) shared with the teacher, “I know it sounds stupid, but I felt like my tree became my friend. I always sit with the same tree, and it literally supports me”. In what began as a tongue-in-cheek decision

to befriend the geese, Thomas chose to sit on the small dock by the pond and check in with the geese each week. He (2025) wrote, "Today I tried to make friends with the Canadian geese. It went well. I was able to infiltrate their ranks, though they were very cautious of me. I've also decided to try to decipher their language—body and vocal." This sense of friendship with plants and animals in nature meets students' needs for authentic connections that bring body, mind, and spirit together.

Pushing back against technology's shallow connections and toward deep relationships is essential for building a sense of belonging. However, technology is a mainstay in our education system and understanding how to use it responsibly and in a mindful manner can be a more useful skill than attempting to cut it out completely: "Technology is making us alienated from ourselves, from our family, and also from nature—and yet nature has the power to heal and to nourish.... The problem is that we're using technology mostly to satisfy our cravings" (Hanh, 2021, p.171). Being in nature made students reflect on the selfish use of technology for exploitation and become more considerate of their school surroundings.

"I look at the park out a window every day for an hour when I'm in Mr. Harold's class, but I've never actually spent time here. Being able to just wander felt like an untapped resource or something, " Thomas (2025) told the teacher. The promise of physical adventure in the park provided an unregulated opportunity, far from the prescriptive and algorithmic offerings students find on their phones. The (relatively) unmanipulated environment in nature sparked student reflection on their own change: "I was hyper-observant before, and would look at the smallest things outside. . . . The study reignited this perception" (Thomas in Conversation with Teacher, 2025). Though just eight weeks long, the experience of existing in nature for a regular amount of time led to observable and describable changes for participants.

A Crisis of Belonging in a Time of Climate Change

"Fear, despair, grief, and anxiety can be triggered by both internal and external causes, whether it is our own life circumstance and the systems we are a part of, or the injustice, inequality, and destruction we witness across the world" (Hanh, 2021, p. 52). Gen Z was born into a post 9/11 world in which crisis is constant. Belief in the causes of climate change has been slowly becoming more mainstream, with 72% of Americans describing themselves as "at least 'slightly concerned'" about the issue (Sparkman et al., 2022, p. 7). In our project, the idea of climate dread was ever present, from light-hearted jokes about enjoying our time while we can to more fully formulated conversations about the stress of impending doom. Students most often expressed disdain for older generations who failed to take action, connecting their apathy for future goals to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness against an already destroyed planet (Sophia in journal, 2025). One student said, "I feel like all schools should be spending as much time outside as possible because there is no way global warming will slow down because billionaires are so greedy and don't care about the environment" (Liam in Conversation with Teacher, 2025). The dread caused by the intersection of human "progress" and the degradation of the environment limited students' sense of belonging.

Teacher 2: *Whole-being Learning from Nature*

Teacher 2 is an environmental science teacher. She played with the word "discipline," rooted in the word "disciple," in one question posed to participants, as mentioned previously. Kristine (2025) picked up the term "disciple" and wrote in her journal, "Journaling and being able to sit in

silence is a sign of discipline. I am becoming a disciple to myself and the environment around me. Allowing me to better understand myself and see things in the bigger picture."[2] In such holistic learning, students' self-awareness is accompanied by being aware of the bigger world. This sense of learning from nature became a central theme of Teacher 2's study, a whole-being learning that integrates sharper observations, emotional attunement, deepened relationships, and caring action. She noticed that in the beginning of the project, students often offered comments about what they were experiencing in nature but later drifted more to how being outside made them feel.

Grieving in Nature

The week when the participants were supposed to start the project, a tragedy occurred that involved their school: another student took his own life. The entire school was shocked, and several students struggled that first day with the purpose of doing the project. But everyone decided to participate, and their journal entries acknowledged the tragedy and its impact. Cindy (2025) wrote, "We have school, and we are going on with our lives. It feels so weird. We shouldn't have school today." Madison, who cried in Teacher 2's arms, did not write anything in her journal for that day, and the emptiness of her page spoke about her profound emotions. As the teacher educator (2005) argues, loss and grieving are seldom discussed at school, even in the midst of death, but should be talked about in a life-affirmative manner. In this case, nature provided an outlet for student participants to work with their emotions.

Several students also wrote in their journals on how precious life is, and that they should connect to the beautiful gifts that nature provided. Nicholas (2025) wrote:

> I wish I could say that looking at the seeds that fall to the ground or the leaves that die and give room for the new ones to grow puts me at ease to know that death is a natural, definite part of life, but it doesn't. It doesn't put my mind at ease, rather it makes me want to appreciate every fallen seed and orange colored leaf more than I ever have.

With nature's companionship, students made meaning from their loss, "to come to terms with what it means when someone dies, and to imagine possibilities for what might come next" (Laidlaw, 1996, p. 45). Sitting under a tree that day, Noelle (2025) commented, "I never realized how loud people are, how loud society and civilization is." Her comment suggested the need to dwell in stillness and quietude while processing what the tragedy meant. Echoing Teacher 1's students, the loudness here refers to psychological, rather than physical, noises.

Sharpened Observation and Emotional Attunement

Students achieved sharpened observations of details in nature as they became attuned to the presence and rhythms of weather, wind, flowers, birds, ducks, spider webs, fish and tadpoles, and duck eggs. Flowers have "become extravagant and the leaves of each plant [are] as complex as rocket science" (Nicholas, 2025). Nicholas (2025) also blended the sharpened perception of nature with his feelings: "Watching water move down a stream in a series of ripples and water seriously is one of the most calming sites to see." Madison (2025) observed the pollution over the creek, a negative effect of human disruption of the natural order, and wrote, "I saw a cinder block today. It was in the water, which looks very polluted today. The donkeys are back, not in petting radius though. Lots of plastic trash today in particular." A sense of ecology is also revealed through

[2] All the quotes from students are taken from students' journal entries, so they are not repetitively indicated in the main text.

Nicholas's (2025) observation:

> The sun is out, nature is thriving. It is days like this that make it easy to be happy. There are hundreds of honeysuckles covering the grass. Each and everyone of them is beautiful, but not two are exactly the same…Each and every part of nature is so different from the other, but somehow it all comes together to form the beautiful outdoors and every piece adds to the beauty.

This insight for a teenager was profound, requiring a holistic viewpoint in observation and understanding.

Being in nature helped students get in touch with their emotions through writing in their journals: "I see birds soaring the sky now. I wonder if that feels like roller skating does for me: freeing" (Kristine, 2025). Feeling free for a high school student is important. Multiple students wrote in their journals on how nature's companionship had changed their emotions positively. On an emotionally difficult morning, Taylor (2025) wrote how nature made her feel: "very at peace.... I really like how quiet it is out here, [even though] the animals are making lots of sounds." She continued, "I don't like hearing the cars, construction, and people. I feel like it's disrupting" Again, here the notion of quietness is about the human disruptions and resulting psychological crowdedness.

Quietude is an important element of attunement (Pinar, 2019; Wang, 2021), as it enables one to listen to nature in a different way and also hear nature speak in a different way. Such a receptive position to nature also enables emotional awareness, including of one's difficult feelings. The word "annoying" appeared in Cindy's journal entries throughout, not only at noises people made, but also at her own appearance, or even the wind. While being in nature and getting fresh air sometimes cooled her down, her mood was not positive in general. But as Kristine (2025) stated, "I do not let my emotions control me, but still let myself feel them." Several students also used drawings, poetry, and fiction writing in their journal to express their complex emotions and artistically build bridges between sensory experiences and symbolic understanding (Kristeva, 2021).

Deepened Relationships with Nature

Throughout the project the students experienced deepened relationships with nature, such as with the weather, weather changes, the creek, and animals. They felt the difference as the local climate transitioned from winter to spring**.** Virginia (2025) had an unusual perspective: "There's something really beautiful about the rain. The way I can hear it patter on the window or feel a raindrop in my hair." The weather played a role in almost every journal entry, as Teacher 2 asked for students' attention to it, but the students established relationships with it in different ways. Students wrote about the wind, the dust, and the potential for tornadoes in local weather, and what the weather meant for them throughout the project. Sun and sunshine, in particular, had special meanings. Multiple students wrote about the beauty and warmth from the sun and associated it with their internal state of mind. Several entries linked the sunshine with a feeling of hope. Annie wrote that the sunshine after many days of rain inspired them to get their schoolwork completed. Others wrote that the sun gave them good energy to interact with others and explore the creek banks.

Developing a deepened relationship with nature took time. Kristine (2025) commented, "Connecting with nature is teaching me to slow down and enjoy what I have now." Slowing down is important for establishing companionship or practicing mindfulness as Teacher 1 invited

students to do. Nicholas (2025) wrote, " Life as a young teenager is very busy and moves by crazy fast, but when I watch the water, it helps me to take a breath and slow down once in a while." Taking time for watching the water and breathing nurtured Nicholas' new awareness.

Several students wrote about the creek itself and noted changes in it as the weeks passed. Madison (2025), who wrote that watching the creek led to calm feelings, noticed its changes: "The creek has become significantly bolder and with all shades of green growing within it." Virginia (2025) had a sense of the life cycle that gave the creek stability despite its seasonal or daily changes:

> "Creek[s] might dry up in a drought or they might overflow with a lot of rain. Either way the creek is there, maybe it looks different or it's in a different season, but it has a beautiful purpose in nature."

Here the change in the creek is also supported by its stable existence. Such a complicated understanding of nature in both change and stability was achieved closer to the end of the project, while the participants also obtained a sense of life as overcoming challenges and coming back, as several students observed in their journals, "better than ever before." The cycle of life imbued Virginia with a sense of resilience, and students' deepening relationships with nature came with a deepened self-awareness.

Bond with Animals and Caring Action

Another interesting relational development was with the donkeys who roamed the banks of the creek. Students played with them, petted them across the fence, and fed them carrots that Teacher 2 gave them. Annie (2025) stated her excitement and enthusiasm: "It is a wonderful sunny day! The sun is out, the grass is green, there is so many honeysuckles, and the donkeys are out! And near us!" Annie also noticed that the donkeys had come closer and become more comfortable with students as time passed, which indicated that the bonding relationship was established through time and the mutuality of interests. Caroline (2025) wrote about how their interactions with the donkeys made the students feel needed. Students enjoyed how much the donkeys loved the carrots; as one of them wrote in their journal " I think I'll really miss the relationship I've established with these donkeys." The donkeys gave the students something to care for outside of their own world full of rules and tasks. Displaying empathy for animals can lead students to enhanced empathetic interaction with their peers (Samuels & Onuoha-Jackson, 2023).

Such caring relationships and actions were not limited to the donkeys or small animals, but extended to the environment itself. Several students noticed that there was so much pollution over the creek, so much garbage hiding its beauty. Virginia stated, "The creek can't clean itself, but people can help. [We should] take away the garbage, the thing that doesn't let it shine." She continued, "We all have our 'trash' and sometimes you need to help to get rid of it." So caring for nature was intertwined with caring for oneself. Marcie (2025) initially felt stressed, but when she found a trash bag, she picked up "a TON of trash around the riverbank. It was really cool. All the donkeys followed me around the whole time. Something about trying to feel connected to nature made me want to care for it more." Being in nature made Marcie want to change something about her way of life, and the action of feeding donkeys baby carrots and taking out trash made her "feel connected to something greater than myself."

Nonviolent Companionship with Nature

The data from the two schools highlight different shades of the central threads, but the

threads are also connected and overlap. A sense of belonging and a process of whole-being learning are intimately related, connecting body, mind, and spirit as well as intellect, emotion, and action. Interestingly, seeking a sense of belonging and engaging in whole-being learning in nature supported each other, connecting self-awareness and ecological consciousness in holistic education, and demonstrating the integrative capacities of nonviolence education.

Nonviolent companionship by design refuses to objectify nature, inviting students to question the human desire for control, to become attuned to their lived relationship with the environment, and to learn from nature why mutual flourishing is essential to the web of life. By and large, students attended to the importance of becoming a part of the natural world without trying to control it; they ventured into the park and the open space, where grieving and healing, surprise, joy, wonder, stillness, and appreciation resided. Their contemplation also led to the questioning of institutional harm and technology-mediated shallow connections in contrast to their desire for deep, humane, and authentic relationships. In addition, they bonded with animals and took caring actions for the environment. A nonviolent relationship with the world enabled, to at least some degree, students' peaceful knowing, being, and interbeing. Some students also achieved deepened self-understanding and a more integrated sense of personhood in relationships. These students have stepped onto the bridges between the inner and the outer, the body and the mind, and the self and non-human other in nonviolence education.

As Tinoco's (2025) practice of nonviolence pedagogy shows, a holistic approach questions the instrumental goal of education and orients teaching and learning towards becoming fully human. Fully human, for many these students, has become including their attunement with nature and care for nature. Compatible with students' nonviolent companionship with nature, the two teachers created conditions for students to experience the world anew, including time, space, relationality, and guidance. Students were invited to learn and experience, not for mastering knowledge, but for relating to the world in curiosity, exploration, and emotional attunement. The teachers did not pre-determine what the students should do; the students followed their own pathways in an unfolding process. The teachers also nonviolently intervened to re-direct students' process according to what emerged. At the same time, the teachers were engaged in cultivating their own inner nonviolence. The teachers' coupling of inner and outer efforts was important in order for them to integrate their own learning and their students' learning.

In short, a collective sense of calm or peace—sometimes after grieving the loss—for participants, a series of individualized breakthroughs, a gradual release of reliance on technology, slowing down to intentionally open new possibilities, and the adoption of caring actions for nature occurred to participants in this collaborative teacher research project. Both teachers report that many students expressed a desire to continue the practice beyond the project period and hoped it could be implemented more widely in the school. The two teachers also shared their findings with their school administrators, who were interested in continuing such practices. This collaborative research project will lead the two teachers to take new actions in their teaching to implement what they have learned in other possible ways. Such projects, however, do not necessarily improve all students' relationships with nature and their self-awareness. One student, for example, did not write about nature in his journal, only his own thoughts, indicating the lack of engagement with the natural world. Our

interest in this study is to show what possibilities can be opened up by such companionship initiatives and collaborative research, with a radical openness to what has emerged, rather than trying to prove the project works.

Limitations of the Study

This collaborative teacher inquiry of nonviolent companionship has its own limitations. First, it only involves classes in two schools and cannot be generalized to other school settings. Teacher research does not claim general applicability but is highly contextualized. Second, the locations of two schools—a charter school and a public school—have direct access to nature. Students do not have social economic privilege, but two schools' access to a park or an open natural place is an asset for conducting this study. It would be more difficult for urban schools where school buildings and city life exclude such easy access. Third, in terms of its methodology, Teachers' observations and conversations with students in this study were naturalistic, so the addition of formal interviews or surveys with students or parents may lead to richer data. Fourth, it is necessary for teachers to have commitment to nonviolence education before conducting such an inquiry. Many teachers may not be interested in this line of inquiry since formal schooling neglects the role of nonviolence. For our future research, seeking more variety of school settings with different relationships with nature and more systematic design of research to include more data will be beneficial.

Implications

This project has implications for teachers and school leaders who are interested in ecological sustainability and students' self-awareness. While as reported above, the project has had positive influences on students, which might invite administrators, other teachers, and students to become interested. As a cautious note, it did not work for all students and we do not intend to present an idealistic view. In addition, such an inquiry requires teachers' interest in nonviolence education, which might not be the case for many teachers. For those teachers who might have an interest in doing so, they may also encounter resistance from parents and administrators who may not see it as beneficial for improving learning outcomes. In addition, accessibility to outdoor space, the class size, and potential difficulties with students' consistent participation, especially in schools with chronic absenteeism. However, taking these challenges into consideration, we think other educators can learn from this project if they are willing to explore opportunities in their own contexts.

First, this project can inform effective curriculum designs to infuse a nonviolent orientation with nature into schools. Incorporating outdoor activities and mindful breathing can deepen students' integrative learning and their sense of belonging. While an 8-week outdoor practice is not feasible for every class, the most productive components can be included into the regular classroom. From morning circles to post-lunch breathing exercises, from a dedicated observation time to a companionship project with a class pet, different subjects and school climate can create spaces for students to experience the natural world and learn from it. The formal curriculum in schools can be unwelcoming, dense, and overwhelming, so incorporating students' experiential learning in nature, artistic activities, or other embodied classroom activities is essential to educating students holistically and helping them develop self-understanding.

Second, centering nonviolent companionship at the core of pedagogy prioritizes the recognition of relatedness in the classroom and provides a frame for students to explore freely with the teacher's pedagogical companionship. In any subject and

grade level, the work of nonviolence centers the acknowledgment and acceptance of difference while emphasizing the role of relationality. Nonviolent companionship not only builds relationships between students and nature, it also positions teachers as co-journeyers, rather than authorities that deliver the knowledge. The process connects teachers and students through listening and dialogue while attending to the details, nuances, and movements of nature. Seeing teachers engaged in inquiry helps remove barriers to learning which might have long accumulated in students who do not feel heard by educators. Through nonviolent companionship practices in the classroom, teachers may reach students previously unwilling to learn. "Meaningful education is based on trust of human nature and recognition of the conditions required for development of human potential" (Dixit, 2024, p. 228). Pedagogy as nonviolent companionship creates such conditions.

Finally**,** this study, although it did not focus on technology, revealed the importance of promoting mindful use of technology. The digital assignments and easy accessibility to phones contributes to a constant state of anxiety in which students do not feel that they measure up to others. Limiting technology use appropriately in the classroom could reduce this clouded mindset. When "unplugged" for the outdoor sessions, students may gradually realize presence is more than digital, and the outdoor activities became less of a release from the norm and more of an occasion all their own. Students are time-bound through school assignments, leaving little room for emotional development and the cultivation of compassion. Tasks are often tied to technology—whether to school-assigned or personal devices. There needs to be a balance between involving youth in a digital world appropriately and enhancing their presence, belonging, and connectedness with one another and with the world.

Acknowledgment:

We would like to thank Nirmal and Tara Sethia Faculty Research Support on Nonviolence for funding this project. We are grateful to Tara Sethia's and Nirmal Sethia's long-time leadership in and commitment to Nonviolence Studies and nonviolence education. We also would like to thank Yiluo Li, a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University, for her help with literature review.

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