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Place-based curriculum making: devising a synthesis between primary geography and outdoor learning

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Outdoor learning provides children with an opportunity to experience the interdisciplinary nature of the real world through interactions with each other and the planet. Geographical enquiry involves exploring the outdoors in an investigative capacity. Space, place and sustainability are three core concepts in primary geography, although sustainability is applicable to all curricular areas. This article argues that the disciplines of primary geography and outdoor learning have much to gain through mutual cooperation and collaboration. For instance, primary geography programmes should include extensive outdoor learning initiatives using local sites such as the school grounds and the local area. This article attempts to make links between the two disciplines of primary geography and outdoor learning, in the interests of promoting education for sustainability. Specifically, the article argues for a conscious synthesis which blends the three dimensions of place, space and sustainability into geographical place-based curriculum making.

Keywords: primary geography; place; space; sustainability; outdoor learning

Introduction

Outdoor learning provides children with an opportunity to experience the interdisciplinary nature of the real world through interactions with each other and the planet. Paradoxically, the literature suggests that children are spending less time outdoors (Gill, 2007). Curriculum theory for primary education has been influenced by the child-centred approaches of Steiner, Froebel and Montessori (Bruce, 2012). Froebel pioneered play as learning and outdoor play was a central element in his philosophy of learning. Montessori developed ideas about outdoor sensory play and the importance of using natural materials for teaching children. Steiner education incorporates outdoor time both for informal play and for the formal learning curriculum. These philosophical theories highlight the importance of outdoor learning for children in all curricular areas including geography.

The outdoor environment is a substantial but often underappreciated resource for primary geography. Notwithstanding this, there are indications that opportunities for geographical fieldwork are diminishing (Ofsted, 2011). Many factors work in complex ways in teachers' locally situated contexts to influence when, if and how teachers conduct work outside the classroom. Financial constraints, time, teacher–pupil ratios, perceptions about safety, weather, transport, disruption to classes and teacher qualification all have an impact (Higgins, Nicol, & Ross, 2006; Mannion, Fenwick, & Lynch, 2012). Parental concerns about children's safety are reducing opportunities for children to independently

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explore their local area (O’Keeffe & O’Beirne, 2013, 2015). Children’s play is increasingly moving indoors and onto electronic screens (Sobel, 2001). Concerns about children’s current and future relationships with the environment are well documented. Louv’s (2010) discussions about ‘nature-deficit disorder’ describe the human cost of alienation from nature, including physical and emotional illness, reduced use of the senses and attention difficulties. According to Louv (2010, p. 36) ‘long-standing studies show a relationship between the absence, or inaccessibility of parks and open space with high crime rates, depression and other urban maladies’ (p. 36). More recent research highlights the links between obesity and inactivity which are further affected by social class and gender (Layte & McCrory, 2011). For instance, during their childhood lower-income adults were involved in fewer sports than their higher income peers (Lunn & Layte, 2008).

In this article, I discuss outdoor learning and primary geography from the perspective of their mutual interest in the concepts of place, space and the environment. This article recommends that primary geography programmes should include extensive outdoor learning initiatives using local sites such as the school grounds and the local area. In particular, outdoor learning can be used in conjunction with primary geography to deepen children’s awareness of their surroundings in the context of place-based education and education for sustainability.

Space, place and sustainability are significant concepts in outdoor education theory as well as in the related fields of environmental and place-based education. These three concepts are central to primary geography. Place and space have received considerable attention in disciplines such as geography (Massey, 1994, 2005), psychology (Morgan, 2010; Stedman, 2002), sociology (Scourfield, Dicks, Drakeford, & Davies, 2006) and more recently in educational research (Clark, 2010; Watchow, 2008). Sustainability can be conceptualised as a cross-curricular theme or as a core geographical concept. It is the subject of much debate particularly in the context of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2003–2014 (Dolan, 2012) and the ensuing Sustainable Development Goals (SGs) (UN, 2015). This article argues that the disciplines of primary geography and outdoor learning have much to gain through mutual cooperation and collaboration.

Outdoor learning

A classic definition of outdoor education was provided by Donaldson and Donaldson in 1958, when they stated that ‘outdoor education is *in*, *about*, and *for* the outdoors’ (original emphasis; cited in Rickinson et al., 2004, p. 17). This has been further developed by Higgins (1995), who prefers the term ‘outdoor learning’. Outdoor learning has been studied as education ‘in’ the outdoors (outdoor activities), ‘through’ the outdoors (personal and social development) and ‘about’ the outdoors (environmental education) (Higgins, 1995). Beames, Atencio, and Ross (2009) argue that outdoor learning is cross-curricular, and can thus support many areas across the curriculum. In a separate study, Beames (2006) argues that effective outdoor learning needs to move away from fragmented, episodic arrangements towards more ongoing sustained place-based engagements whereby children negotiate what is learned. Two longitudinal school-based case studies were conducted in Scandinavian primary schools (Jordet, 2007; Mygind, 2005). Their findings suggest that an outdoor environment can be used for all subjects, and to support personal and social development. While cross-curricular opportunities offered by outdoor learning include some geographical learning, primary geographers such as Scoffham (2010), Catling (2005) and Witt (2013) argue that geographical learning is a much

stronger component of outdoor learning. The Geographical Association maintains that 'learning directly in the untidy real world outside the classroom continues to be a fundamental aspect of a broad geographical curriculum' (2009, p. 23). Taking children outside does not have to involve transport and additional expense. Dymont (2005) argues that school grounds should be used as outside classrooms, whereas Beames, Higgins, and Nicol (2012) advocate the use of an educational model which values local and place-based learning. This concurs with contemporary thinking in geography where local places are considered key resources for the geography teacher. According to Witt (2013, p. 57): 'within a broad and rich geography curriculum where place is valued, children have the opportunity to engage deeply with local places and consider geographical ideas of scale, interconnectedness and environmental change'.

From a geographical perspective, outdoor learning has the potential to stimulate children's interest in the environment. It enables children to know the locality in which they live, and to develop a sense of what is distinctive about their place. Outdoor learning encourages a questioning, critical approach to geography. Children are stimulated to ask questions, to recognise and investigate patterns, and so develop critical thinking skills. Being outside provides real situations in which geographical skills are seen to be necessary and relevant. Outdoor learning fosters the critical foundation on which a sense of care of the environment is based, and can be used to integrate many elements of the primary curriculum, including history, science, language and mathematics but especially geography.

Traditionally, field trips have been an important element in geography. Recently, there has been significant interest in outdoor learning or learning outside the classroom, which includes traditional field trips (Beames et al., 2012). Traditional field work has tended to be highly structured and adult led where children are assigned pre-determined tasks. Much of the philosophy of outdoor learning corresponds to geographical enquiry-based learning (Roberts, 2003). Geographical enquiry is presented as an active, questioning approach to teaching and learning which is integrated with the development of geographical skills by Rawling (2000). Both outdoor learning and geographical enquiry are more open ended and child centred. Bringing the children out of the classroom to engage in outdoor learning has many well-documented benefits including health, well-being, environmental education, awareness of aesthetic qualities of the local environment and geographical learning (Waite, 2011).

Primary geography

Alastair Bonnett describes geography as 'one of humanity's big ideas', 'a fundamental fascination' and 'a core component of a good education' (2008, p. 1). In the Irish primary curriculum, geography is defined as 'the study of the earth, its inhabitants and the relationships between them in the context of place, space, and the environment' (NCCA/DES [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment/Department of Education and Skills], 1999, p. 6). Both the Geographical Association Manifesto (Geographical Association, 2009) and Lambert (2009) use the term 'living geography'. This conceptual interpretation embraces children's personal geographies. While 'living geography' is about current issues, it recognises the past and it is also futures oriented, whereby children are encouraged to think about their personal, collective and spatial futures. Its emphasis on sustainability generates a synthesis across the physical and human worlds. A focus on local geography is set in wider spatial and global contexts, requiring children to focus on specific geographical

issues through interlocking scales. A key dimension of ‘living geography’ involves the children working as investigators of processes that bring change to environments—these can be grouped as environmental (or ‘physical’), social, economic or political. Finally, the concept ‘living geography’ presents a dynamic interpretation of geography, which promotes a critical, conceptual interrogation of key geographical ideas to support children’s conceptual development of place, space and the environment.

Primary education geographers were recently asked about their formative experiences in geography. In this study (Catling et al., 2010), several significant features emerged, including experiences of ‘freedom to roam’ locally, family holidays, outings and trips abroad, access to and using maps, fieldwork activities at primary or secondary school and with other organisations and the impact of a good teacher. Yet memories of geography for some student-teachers tend to be limited to tracing maps, rote learning of geographical lists such as names of rivers and mountains as well as boring encounters with text books (Dolan, Waldron, Pike, & Greenwood, 2014; Waldron et al., 2009). Those with positive memories remember the teacher who inspired them, the teacher who engaged the children in enquiry projects and the teacher who brought the children outside regardless of weather conditions. Positive memories of geographical learning are closely associated with experiential learning outside (Waldron et al., 2009).

Children have many outdoor experiences, albeit mixed in quality and quantity. They experience the world through many daily journeys and interactions with their environment. Children negotiate and interact with a variety of landscapes (human and natural) on a daily basis. For example, children travel a variety of routes, they make decisions about places to visit and increasingly they use mobile hand-held devices (including mobile phones) to map their location and to communicate spatial information. More importantly, they have many geographical questions about the outdoors. Through these daily interactions and decisions they build up a wide knowledge base about the world, near and far, through a range of direct and indirect experiences. Formal geographical education, on the other hand, tends to take place indoors, as this rich and diverse geographical knowledge is not recognised as a platform from which deeper conceptual understanding can be developed.

Fran Martin (2005, 2008) uses the term ‘ethnogeography’ to highlight the geographical knowledge available to all learners because of each person’s personal geographical knowledge. Ethnogeography reflects the view that all learners (including children) are geographers because they all live in the real world. Martin argues that there is a distinction to be made between academic geography, the discipline and being a geographer in the everyday sense described above.

Prioritising children’s geographies or children’s geographical knowledge can change the way geography is taught in the twenty-first century (Catling, 2011). Focusing on children’s geographies allows children to be active agents in their own learning. This focus also provides teachers with the means to engage with their own geographical learning as well as that of the children in their class. This will assist teachers to enhance the curriculum and to become ‘curriculum makers’ through reconstructing, revitalising and owning the geography programmes in their schools. According to Catling (2011, p. 27) this will enable teachers to develop their own geographical studies to foster, excite and deepen children’s geographical understanding and engagement in and beyond school. Through children working as curriculum makers there is potential for outdoor learning and geography to intersect through ‘place-responsive pedagogy’.

Place-responsive pedagogy

Mannion et al. (2012) suggest the term ‘place-responsive pedagogy’ as a means of ‘considering how educators make explicit efforts to collaborate in assembling people, places and purposeful activities together, to produce viable and valuable environmental educational experiences’ (p. 2). Wattochow and Brown contend that ‘place is suggestive of both the imaginative and physical reality of a location and its people, and how the two interact and change each other’ (2011, p. xxi). Place is therefore more than a physical environment as it comes to have meaning through people’s interactions with it. Places and spaces are socially constructed. According to Waite and Pratt (2011, p. 7): ‘spaces have particular possibilities, history and associations for children and adults that make them meaningful “places” and these are constantly being revised by ongoing experiences in them’. Geography provides an opportunity to draw together concepts of place, space and sustainability through outdoor learning and place-responsive pedagogy. In the following I will explore the three concepts of place, space and sustainability in greater detail.

Place

One of the core aims of primary geography is the development of a sense of place. This process involves exploring—where places are, what they are like and how they relate to each other. Place is a complex phenomenon. Places can be local, immediate and concrete, such as a child’s home or his/her school and the school grounds, or places can be far away and abstract. Buildings, towns, cities and countries are all referred to as places. Place can be small as a street or as large as a continent. Indeed, according to Doreen Massey (1984), it is the geographer’s fundamental interest in place and understanding the differences between localities that has often led it to the study of how these different elements come together in particular spaces ‘to form the complex mosaic which is the geography of society’ (p. 1).

While the literature from outdoor learning highlights the importance of learning through landscapes (Beames et al., 2012), Harrison (2010) argues that place is an under-researched aspect of UK outdoor environmental education. Indeed, traditional outdoor education programmes have been criticised for their failure to incorporate the ‘story’ of the land (Beames, 2006).

Higgins (2009) suggests that developing a connection with place ‘provides a start point for relationships (connections) with people within a community that allows further developmental outcomes, such as understanding the consequences of one’s actions and an ethic of citizenship and care’ (p. 48). While outdoor adventure education programmes take place in locations away from the children’s localities, outdoor learning advocates argue that learning contexts should be set in the real world of children; that is, in their own localities. Geographers argue that the locality is a rich site for children’s learning, and place-based education advocates such as Smith argue that geographical education should ‘ground learning in local phenomena and students’ lived experiences’ (2002, p. 586). Beames et al. (2012) argue that children knowing their places is the starting point for most meaningful learning through a sustained engagement with people and the landscape itself. These are key aspirations of primary geography.

Scoffham’s framework (Figure 1) for envisaging place shows how different dimensions of place can be viewed through different scales and time frames. Place can be viewed in historical, contemporary or futuristic terms—that is, what has happened in this place in the past; what is currently happening; and what will this place look like in the

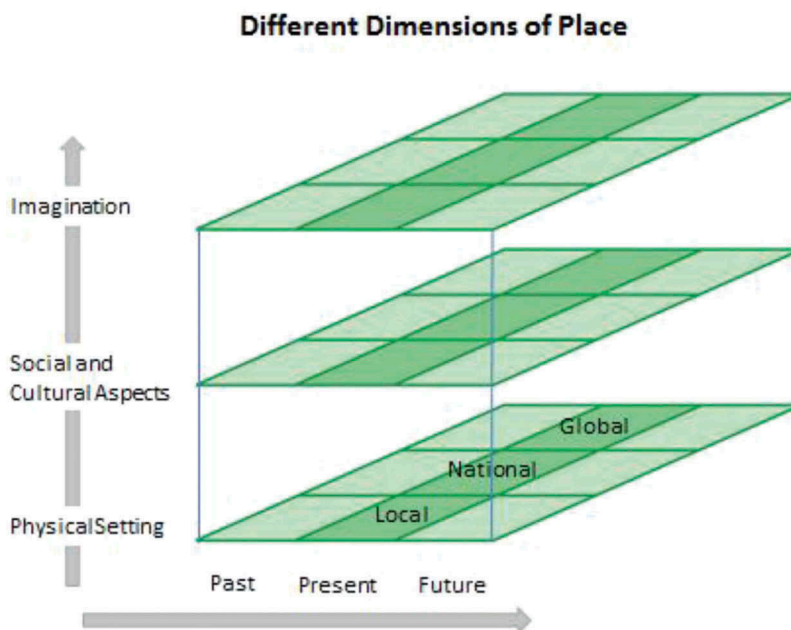


Figure 1. Scoffham's framework for envisaging place shows how different dimensions of place can be viewed through different scales and time frames.

Source: Scoffham (2013, p. 181).

future? Places can be explored through a number of perspectives including social, cultural, political and physical. Places can be re-created through our imagination.

An educational framework that emphasises the role of teaching and learning in nearby places, hence connecting schools with the community and society, is place-based education. According to Hutson (2011, p. 19), 'place based education seeks to connect learners to local environments through a variety of strategies that increase environmental awareness and connectedness to particular parts of the world'. The importance of place-based education has been noted by several commentators from the disciplines of geography and outdoor learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Harrison, 2010; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011; McKenzie, 2008; Payne & Wattchow, 2008; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 1994; Stewart, 2008; Wattchow, 2008a; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). McInerney et al. (2011) suggest that the rationale for adopting place-based education in schools is that it 'creates opportunities for young people to learn about and care for ecological and social wellbeing of the communities they inhabit and the need to connect schools with communities as part of a concerted effort to improve student engagement and participation' (p. 5). They also suggest that place-based education may position young people as producers rather than consumers of knowledge and provide them with knowledge and experience to participate in democratic processes.

Space

Space and spatial awareness are core components of geography. Yet the concept of space is contested. Space can be physical or virtual, real or imagined, social or personal, formal

or in-formal and it can be communicated through several modes. With the advent of geographical information systems a variety of spatial analysis tools are increasingly accessible. A geographic information system is a computer-based facility for the storage, retrieval, manipulation, analysis and display of geographic data. In geographical terms, spatial awareness is the ability to see two or more objects in relation to each other and to oneself. Spatial skills tend to develop naturally as children grow. Yet primary curricula generally acknowledge the role of education in the development of strong spatial awareness. The development of spatial awareness is a cross-curricular matter but has particular resonance with geography. It is important for all daily navigational functions including estimating distance, direction and rate of speed. Spatial awareness affects motor skills overall, and is therefore extremely important. Outdoor learning and the use of all five senses are recommended for fostering spatial thinking with children. Drawing outline maps of classrooms and school buildings, together with reference to maps, globes and Google Earth, along with outdoor exploration of the school grounds collectively develop a child's spatial awareness.

A sense of space is important for young children in terms of developing their sense of identity, community and responsibility to the environment (Palmer, 2002). Social geographers such as Kraftl, Horton, and Tucker (2012) consider the impact of geographical spaces on children, suggesting that ownership and agency increase commitment, growth and learning. Outdoor learning activities provide children with opportunities to interact, create and re-create local spaces.

Sustainability

Sustainability is the potential for long-term well-being, which has ecological, economic, political and cultural dimensions. It requires the reconciliation of environmental, social equity and economic demands—also referred to as the ‘three pillars’ of sustainability (Sterling, 2001). Education is often quoted as an important strategy for achieving sustainability. Education for sustainable development is defined as a ‘concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to be responsible for creating and enjoying a sustainable future’ (UNESCO, 2002, p. 7). There is widespread consensus in the literature that education has a key role to play in our attempts to realise ecologically sustainable economic development (Taylor, Nathan, & Coll, 2003). Education for global citizenship and sustainability helps young people develop the understanding, skills and values to think critically about the complexity of the globalised and interdependent world they live in, as well as their rights—and responsibilities—to each other and the planet. Calls for more action from education have increased in the light of mounting anxiety over environmental problems. In terms of learning to read our world and to engage with our environment, it is important for policy-makers to realise the importance of ‘ecological literacy’ (Stone & Barlow, 2005), or in Peacock’s (2009) and Capra’s (2002) terms ‘ecoliteracy’. According to Capra:

in the coming decades, the survival of humanity will depend on our ecological literacy—our ability to understand the basic principles of ecology and to live accordingly. Thus, ecological literacy, or ‘eco-literacy’, must become a critical skill for politicians, business leaders and professionals in all spheres, and should be the most important part of education at all levels—from primary and secondary schools to colleges, universities and the continuing education and training of professionals. (2002, p. 201)

Place making, story creation and curriculum building

Geography highlights the interdependent relationship between place, space and sustainability. Place and space constantly interact through geographical studies. Henderson and Potter (2001, p. 84) explain how place and space are not the same: 'space is unstoried place'. The education content taught in children's own localities allows children to learn from and in local 'spaces'. Meaningful learning experiences transform space into place and help children develop a sense of place and identity (Beames et al., 2012).

Stone (2009) argues that place-based education is fundamental to schooling for sustainability. He claims that 'places known deeply are deeply loved, and well-loved places have the best chance to be protected and preserved, to be cherished and cared for by future generations' (2009, p. 13). When people acquire a deep knowledge of a particular place, they begin to care about what happens to the landscape, creatures and people in it. Smith (2002) also argues that when schooling seeps into the realm of the real world, outside the classroom, and students and educators become creators of a place-based curriculum, 'the wall between the school and the community becomes much more permeable and is crossed with frequency (and) it serves to strengthen children's connections to others and to the regions in which they live' (pp. 593–594). Tovey (2007) suggests that we must allow children the opportunity to develop an intimate relationship with nature to understand but more importantly to feel the interconnectedness of all living things and to see their own place in the world. Beames et al. (2012) suggest that 'perhaps the underlying assumption behind place based education is that directly interacting with "place" will foster an appreciation of and a broad ethic of caring for the land and its varied inhabitants' (p. 41).

Place-based education is about generating a deep knowledge of a particular place so that children will eventually care about landscape, nature and people linked to a place. The term 'sense of place' is often used to emphasise that places are significant because they are the focus of personal feelings. Sense of place pervades everyday life and experience, and it indicates that places are infused with meaning and feelings (Rose, 1995). A sense of place also incorporates spatial selection and environmental appreciation because individuals are selective about the qualities which make their personal place special, situated and unique. According to Stedman, sense of place can be conceived 'as a collection of symbolic meanings, attachments, and satisfaction with a spatial setting held by an individual or group' (2002, p. 563).

Further exploration of this interdependent nature between place, space and the environment can be achieved through a range of place-making activities in schools. Witt (2013) calls for a playful approach to geography. She recommends place making in the outdoors in general, and den making in particular, as a means of providing children with opportunities to engage physically and cognitively with a place. According to Witt, 'den making is a universal experience of childhood'. Children enjoy creating their own places outdoors and these places can provide rich contexts for learning. Catling and Pickering (2010) argue that place making for children actively develops their higher order thinking skills. Den making can help children to assess the quality of their local area and to consider their role in their community.

The experience of place and the expression of place can also feature through a variety of visual and story-telling methodologies. By giving places a story, children can understand what has happened to a place (geographically, environmentally,

culturally, historically) and can develop their own connection with a place. Witt argues that children should have opportunities to ‘construct and respond to their surroundings, enabling them to build on and extend their personal geographies and celebrate the wonder of the world whilst creating a lasting sense of stewardship for their world’ (2013, p. 57).

Gruenewald (2003) argues that rather than avoiding the realities of human-created crises, educators should pursue pedagogical strategies for engaging with complex ecological themes that are age appropriate and in sync with each child’s developmental stage. Sobel (1996) concurs; ‘what’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds’ (p. 10).

Recent educational studies have promoted concepts of education which are cross-curricular, locally relevant and involve children’s taking responsibility (Beames & Ross, 2010). In response to a number of critiques of outdoor education practice, the Outdoor Journeys programme was devised which involved the adoption of a journey pedagogy for learning outside the classroom (Beames et al., 2009). This cross-curricular programme situated in the ‘real world’ of the child is based on the human and ecological story of the children’s local area. Outdoor Journeys is based on three phases which are negotiated between children and classroom teachers. Firstly, the children devise questions on the basis of their initial exploration of the locality. After identifying a key question or a topic of interest, the children conduct some research and finally the children share their work with their class and other potential audiences such as teachers or members of the wider community. While the initiative was heavily immersed in local history and ecology, Beames et al. (2009) question whether the ‘place consciousness’ of the pedagogy is compatible with the epistemology of the dominant curriculum. I contend that place consciousness is compatible with geography and the two disciplines have the potential to complement each other.

Formal education has been critiqued by environmental educators such as Orr (2004, p. 8) as an education which is compartmentalised, fragmented and disconnected from the natural environment. In this kind of education only certain types of intelligences are valued while ecological intelligence is absent. Ecological intelligence (Goleman, 2009) allows us to comprehend systems in all their complexity, as well as the interplay between the natural and human-made worlds. Psychiatrist and writer Iain McGilchrist (2009) explains how our ‘divided brain’ has profoundly altered human behaviour, culture and society. Education with a holistic perspective is concerned with the development of every person’s intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potentials. Education for sustainable development offers a philosophical, theoretical and practical platform to engage student-teachers with a more holistic experience of education through practical engagement with issues of sustainability. This includes practical experiences such as forest schools (Knight, 2011), learning outside the classroom (Beames et al., 2012) and a range of creative approaches to education (Scoffham & Barnes, 2011). Theorists such as Orr (2004) and Sterling (2001) believe that education for sustainable development should be holistic in its approach. This is challenging in the context of secondary education with more rigid timetables. However, the primary curriculum which supports cross-curricular approaches, thematic teaching and integration (Greenwood, 2007) provides many opportunities depending on the interest and motivation of primary school principals and teachers.

Conclusion

This article argues that primary geography and outdoor learning have much in common and have much to gain from closer collaboration. In order to help children to engage with their locality through outdoor learning and geographical engagement, teachers need assistance in their pre-service and in-service education programmes. Mannion et al. (2012) noted that the level of teachers' work in outdoor settings was differentiated by their levels of expertise and prior experience of teaching in outdoor settings. Wattchow and Brown (2011) propose that place-responsive pedagogy requires an apprenticeship to place for teachers. This suggests that teacher education programmes need to incorporate sustained experiential outdoor learning for every student-teacher.

Geography and outdoor education have much to offer each other in the context of place-based education and education for sustainability. However, these potential benefits have not been acknowledged to date. For example, the Curriculum for Excellence for Scotland does not mention primary geography yet its philosophical underpinnings parallel those of primary geography. Beames and Ross' (2010) work on journeys outside the classroom is all about local geography but geography is not mentioned. Beames et al. (2012) acknowledge that caring for and developing a relationship with a place takes time and should occur through repeated visits and long-term projects. On the other hand, primary geography tends to focus on the narrow dimensions of fieldwork rather than the broader principles of outdoor learning. This is a core concern of primary geography. Surely the time has come for geographers and outdoor learning advocates to pool their resources, share their ideas and work collaboratively towards the achievement of their common aims and goals. Although there is an increased interest in place, there is a need for a closer connection between theories on place from a geographical perspective and from theories on outdoor teaching and learning. By incorporating children's own geographies and Martin's concept of ethnogeography, teachers can maximise the geographical potential of outdoor learning and can simultaneously teach a substantial part of the geography curriculum by bringing children outside the classroom.

In short, both primary geography and outdoor learning have, through their silences, missed opportunities to strengthen each respective tradition by borrowing from the other. The aim of this article is to invite primary geographers and outdoor learning specialists to deepen and expand their work by consciously blending approaches from both disciplines and pedagogical fields of practice.

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