



Special Places:

Place attachment and children's happiness

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Can you think of some places which are special to you? In numerous workshops over the last two decades, I have asked hundreds of teachers and other education professionals to nominate a place that is special to them and to explain why. A huge range places, in the United Kingdom and beyond, have been identified, but the reasons they have been nominated are remarkably consistent. They usually relate to one or more of three factors – memories of having had a good time there (e.g. childhood homes, holidays, higher education, honeymoons); associations with the significant loved people (e.g. parents, partners, other family and friends); and, less frequently, the intrinsic qualities of the place, such as its beauty, peacefulness, grandeur or wildness. I use this exercise to draw people's attention to the fact that we have feelings about places, and that some places have particular personal significance and meaning for us. These emotional bonds are referred to as place attachment by environmental psychologists.

It seems from research that the foundations of place attachment are laid in childhood, and a number of researchers have explored the role of place attachment in children's lives, demonstrating its significance for social and emotional development. This work reinforces the common sense view that the places in which children play, live and are educated are important for their physical and mental health. Ultimately, places contribute to children's present and future happiness.

In this article, I describe how place attachments are formed, and their relevance to children's emotional well-being. I then explore the implications of this for schools, and suggest some ways in which teachers can promote children's secure attachment to place and deepen their understanding of our affective response to places.

Place attachment

Place attachment develops through significant and positive experiences of and in particular places, and the literature suggests that childhood experiences are particularly important. Place attachment is typically characterised by people feeling warm, positive emotions about the place,

associating it with a sense of security, familiarity and belonging, and identifying with it. People usually express place attachment by talking about the place with evident pleasure, and by identifying themselves in reference to it, e.g. 'I'm a dyed in the wool Yorkshireman'. People may also acquire and display pictures, photographs and items which remind them of places which are special to them, such as their childhood home, university campus and city, or favourite holiday destinations. Research suggests that people may be unaware of the strength of their place attachments until they are threatened in some way, perhaps by the prospect of moving home or by some external threat to the place itself.

In a brief review of relevant literature, Christopher Spencer has explored the relationship between place attachment, place identity and the development of a child's self identity. Drawing on the literature of developmental psychology, he first notes that self and social identities are partly formed through group membership and that group social distinctiveness is often associated with place, as illustrated by such statements as 'We are the boys

from the Bronx' (Spencer, 2005). Turning to research undertaken by environmental psychologists (e.g. the collection edited by Altman and Low, 1992), Spencer concludes that place attachment is integral to self identity, providing a sense of stability and security. To emphasise this point, he draws attention to 'breakdown' situations where place attachment is disrupted. These include scenarios familiar to us all, such as the homesickness some young people feel on leaving home, the violation many people experience when their homes are burgled, and the more radical displacement experienced by refugees or asylum-seekers. In summary, Spencer argues that: 'It is clear that the plausible, intuitively persuasive, case for the importance of place in the development of a complete, rounded self identity has begun to be made' (Spencer, 2005).

Finally, he concludes that the teaching of geography, particularly if it starts from children's own geographies, as advocated by Catling (2003), has an important role in the enhancement of children's personal well-being.

Children's place attachment

Very young children usually develop attachments to their home and other places where they feel safe and secure, such as their nursery or grandparents' home. Research suggests that, in the past, as they became older, and particularly in mid-childhood, children made forays from the secure home base to exploit the opportunities for play and exploration afforded by the wider local environment. Clare Cooper Marcus, for example, has collected hundreds of 'environmental autobiographies' which attest to the enduring resonance of places in adult memories of childhood. She found that many people have powerful memories of the house and neighbourhood where they grew up and of the 'secret places of childhood and adolescence', such as hidden dens and lairs and designated play spaces such as forts and tree houses (Cooper Marcus, 1992). These experiences, especially den making, or other forms of appropriating unsupervised space for child initiated activities, have been identified as particularly important in developing place attachment. Louise Chawla has developed a developmental sequence of the type of places which emerge as significant as children grow and develop (Chawla, 1992). Sadly, more recent work suggests that most children in the UK no longer have the freedom to roam their local neighbourhood, missing out on significant opportunities for play, personal and social development, and for self-directed exploration of the natural and built environment.

Implications for schools

The emerging evidence of the importance of place attachment for emotional well-being has a number of implications for geographical education in the early and primary years.

The first set of implications relate to the school environment itself. All teachers know that children learn more effectively in attractive, well-maintained and appropriately-furnished classrooms and schools, and that playtime behaviour can be significantly improved by environmental enhancement such as zoning (creating designated areas for different types of activities) and the provision of play equipment. Many also recognise that the emotional environment is just as important. If they are to flourish, children need to feel

psychologically safe and secure, understand expectations and know that they will be protected from unacceptable behaviour such as public humiliation or bullying when at school. Our emerging understanding of the importance of place attachment for healthy psychological development suggests that school environment may have deeper significance. We know that secure attachment to significant others in babies and toddlers creates a template for successful relationships in future life (Bowlby, 1953; 1988), and it seems reasonable to suggest that there is a parallel with place attachment. If this is so, then we need to actively nurture children's affective bond with school and the local area, supporting the establishment of a strong and secure self identity. Figure 1

Place attachment is important for healthy social and emotional development. These activities build place attachment, providing opportunities for children to notice and attend to their feelings for places which are special to them.

- Ask children to draw a place which is special to them. Invite them to talk about what makes it special in their lives
- Invite the children to shut their eyes and imagine themselves in their special place and then to notice how they feel when they think about being there. Encourage them to use a range of vocabulary to describe their emotions
- Create a class book, display or digital photo gallery of 'Our Special Places' incorporating children's drawings or photographs and quotes
- Ask children to take photographs of special places around school, or the local area, and discuss the feelings these places provoke. Discuss the sorts of features that make a place special, and how we can look after these places
- Design a trail which highlights the special places in the school grounds, local park or local area, and create a leaflet to publicise it to the intended audience, e.g. parents making school choices, new pupils, local residents, etc.
- Provide a local area map or, if appropriate for more travelled children, a British Isles map or world atlas, and a pile of sticky notes, and invite children to annotate the map with notes explaining why particular places are special to them
- If your school grounds are suitable, invite the children to find their own special place in them. Suggestions for this can be found in Dyer and Lewis, 2001, pp. 51-2.

Figure 1: Activities to foster place attachment.

Environmental enhancement projects provide opportunities for children to develop the attributes of concerned and active citizens, and make an authentic contribution to the school and local communities. They also foster place attachment.

- Involve the children in planning and undertaking environmental improvement activities in the school grounds or local area, such as creating a pond, wildlife area, vegetable garden, improved play facilities or traffic calming measures
- Undertake a survey of local residents' views of environmental problems, and work with community groups, local planners or politicians to campaign for improvement
- Look at photos of environmental art and use found or natural materials to create environmental art in the school grounds. Invite parents, governors and other local people to the exhibition of the finished works
- Work with a local organisation and/or an artist in residence to design a work of art, such as a mural or sculpture, for a local open space.

Figure 2: Securing environmental improvements.

suggests some activities which will help children notice and attend to and express their feelings about places which are special to them. It is important to remember that children may notice and value environmental features in very different ways to adults, as illustrated by Paula Owens' wonderful photo-story of a walk with two three-year-olds at Shellness (Owens, 2008). School or local area environmental improvement projects which enable children to see they can make real difference are also powerful in building place attachments. This can involve taking practical action to enhance the environment, or working with local community groups, politicians or planners to campaign for and achieve change. Some possible suggestions are offered in Figure 2.

The second linked implication relates to the curriculum and teaching and learning approaches. A number of authors, including Catling (2003) and Martin (2008), argue that the geography curriculum should give greater prominence to children's own geographies. Geographical work which takes children's personal geographies as its starting point will naturally build on their existing knowledge and understanding of places and will also acknowledge their affective responses. The study of the local area, including the school and its grounds in the Foundation Stage and key stage 1 and 2 geography curriculum offers many opportunities to explore and deepen children's existing place attachments. Every local area includes features of note and value, such as open spaces, interesting buildings or historic street patterns or place names. Following Spencer's argument, the inclusion of the local area in the primary curriculum itself contributes to the development of a strong self-identity. Work in and about the local area validates the children's home and neighbourhood as interesting and worthy of study. In the same way, paying attention to children's feelings about places validates these as significant, important and valued. Some suggestions for exploring affective responses to place are included in Figure 3. These include a variety of cross-curricular approaches, drawing especially on the creative arts, since art, drama, music, creative writing, etc. offer exciting opportunities for exploring and expressing emotions.

Third, research suggests that happy, memorable experiences in significant places facilitate emotional well-being. The implication of this for schools is that we should seek to ensure children have plenty of opportunities for authentic first-hand learning outside the classroom. The Manifesto for Outdoor Learning advocates that every child should experience the world beyond the school as an essential part of learning and personal development.

Fieldwork and other educational visits are an essential element in the geography curriculum, and offer many opportunities for children to have memorable experiences in memorable places.

Links to a broader educational agenda

In this article, I have suggested that it is important for teachers to understand children's emotional responses to and attachments to places. I have also made some suggestions for learning activities which help children to explore, recognise and express their feelings about places.

The approach suggested fits with and supports a number of contemporary policies and initiatives, including the Every Child Matters agenda, the SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) curriculum, and the promotion of active and concerned citizenship.

The Every Child Matters agenda has identified five key outcomes. As argued above, helping children to appreciate the places that are important in their lives and recognise their restorative and intrinsic value, and facilitating their attachment to places of personal significance can all contribute to children's psychological

Places can provoke strong feelings, and these activities can help children to notice, recognise, and express their emotional responses to local and distant places.

- Create a group affective map. Use a base map of the school grounds, a local park or the local area and ask the children to complete it by using symbols to show where they feel happy, excited, calm, etc. Discuss the patterns of emotions for places that emerge. North (2008) provides a detailed case study of using Quickmaps for affective mapping
- Visit somewhere with a strong or dramatic sense of place (e.g. old or religious building, local woodland, a wildspace, historic townscape) and focus on experiencing it with all the senses, and on how the children feel in this place. Talk about the emotions they experience. Create a collective art work which encapsulates the spirit of the place, e.g. photo montage, mural, wall hanging, clay frieze, etc. Or use the experience as a stimulus for creative writing
- Use movement to explore the idea that a place may affect how we feel. Try imagining being on a stormy beach, deep underground in a dark cave, or just inside the door of a magnificent building and stand/move as appropriate. Use 'freeze frame' to capture the stance, and ask children to say how they feel in this pose
- Use role-play or simulation to debate a controversial issue and use 'hot seating' to explore how the children feel about the issue when they are in character. Or use the format of a TV studio discussion, with the teacher in role as the presenter, inviting contributions from interested parties and the audience
- Study a picture depicting a landscape. How do you feel when you look at the picture? Can you guess how the artist felt about the place? Do you know any places that make you feel like this? Create pictures in the style of the artist/picture
- Collect newspaper cuttings, LA Planning Department information, campaign group leaflets, etc. about a real local controversial issue, e.g. the building of a supermarket on a playing field or houses on a piece of waste ground, and try to identify how the people who wrote/produced these feel about the issue. Design posters, brochures or television adverts for or against the proposed development which are intended to appeal to the emotions
- Use photographs to explore affective responses – use different colour stickers to identify photos which make them feel happy, sad, interested, etc. and discuss why these photos provoke these responses. Is it the photograph or the place which stimulates this response?
- Read picture books or stories where attachment to place is significant, and explore how the characters feel about the place, and why. Speech or thought bubbles on sticky notes placed on pictures are a great way of recording this activity
- Listen to music inspired by a place, and ask the children to draw the sort of place it invokes for them. Compare the finished picture to the composer's inspiration.

Figure 3: Activities to explore affective responses to places.

health and happiness. In addition, such activities are likely to engage children's interest, motivate them to enjoy and achieve, support their personal and social development, and enhance the likelihood that they will make a positive contribution to caring for the environment. This in turn contributes to the promotion of active and concerned citizenship.

The SEAL curriculum, building on the pioneering work of Daniel Goldman on emotional intelligence, focuses on five social and emotional aspects of learning – self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills. It aims to develop the underpinning qualities and skills that promote positive behaviour and effective learning by building on existing school activities such as circle time, and the PSHE and citizenship curricula. Activities such as those suggested in Figure 1 enhance children's self awareness by encouraging them to notice and express their feelings. Discussion and group work, such as producing a class book or digital gallery on Our Special Places, develop their social skills and ability to empathise with others. Several of the six themes identified in the SEAL scheme of work offer opportunities for place-related work. New Beginnings, for example, could involve consideration of how it feels to move from one classroom or school to another, while

Changes has natural links with geographical work on environmental change, degradation and enhancement.

Conclusion

Primary schools have traditionally focused on children's all-round development, seeking to nurture their physical, social and emotional growth as well as their educational achievement. Following a period in which tests and league tables have seemed to dominate our endeavours, there is now a welcome return to a wider agenda, which has children's holistic development at its centre. There is a growing body of evidence that secure place attachment is important for emotional well-being, and schools are well placed to foster this through stimulating and appropriate curricular experiences.

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