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Editorial: Child, place, and others: interactions that support outdoor learning

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When we planned this special edition, we wanted to encourage articles that would provide insight into what occurred within the processes of various forms of outdoor learning, shining a light on the complex interactions between the child, the context and others in mediating experiences and learning. The articles presented here do not disappoint in this, and their diversity of approaches has surprised and delighted us. They include provocations that we hope will generate continuing debate and inquiry into complex interactions in outdoor learning. It was not possible to include all submitted articles in this special issue. In some cases, they were not ready for our deadlines for publication in 2022, but those of high quality will be published in later general issues of the journal. We would like to thank all those who submitted articles for consideration and the reviewers of their papers for their help in constructing this examination of interactions between child, place, and others.

The ‘child’ is represented in the included papers within early years, primary school, secondary school and college student education phases. Geographically, the ‘places’ in the articles stem within Australia, Malaysia, Portugal and the US, but the term ‘place’ has also been interpreted in temporal, socioeconomic and material terms, which are described in rich detail. ‘Others,’ as we hoped, have included the more-than-human as well as programme instructors, local communities and policy makers. We hope you will find this collection both interesting and thought provoking.

Originating from Australia, the first paper by Tracey Dickson and Tonia Gray takes a macro-sociohistorical look at the contemporary challenges posed by neoliberal policies and COVID-19 for young people worldwide. This globalised relationship between ‘child, place, and others’ is temporally situated, aligning current issues with societal ‘decays’ posited long ago by Kurt Hahn (1959). Their suggestion that nature-based solutions through outdoor education can offer both preventative and restorative amelioration of negative impacts, caused by urbanisation, threats such as climate change to sustainability on our planet and the pandemic COVID-19, will resonate with many. In addition, the historical echoes in addressing these ‘wicked problems’ may arouse debate about locating remedies for societal and environmental crises within the child. The process that we witness in this paper is the argumentation of the authors for the value of this ‘back bearing’ in addressing current and future issues.

In the second paper, Australia-based authors, Michael Norwood, Ali Lakhani and Elizabeth Kendall focus on how secondary school students and their teachers respond to an intervention involving nature-based learning. Rather than the pedagogy being changed by the place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), they try to keep ‘indoor’ teaching methods constant to explore the effect of nature itself on the young people taught outside in a quasi-experimental case study. They employ person environment compatibility (Kaplan, 1983) and attention restoration theories (Kaplan, 1995) and affordances concepts (Gibson, 1977) to help explain the interaction of place with child and others. Although it

was not possible in their research design to unpick overlapping factors such as greenness, teaching and novelty or the effect of prior attitudes towards nature, the study represents an innovative attempt to dig into the detail of where and what are best aligned for different aspects of students' learning, offering suggestions for future development of outdoor classrooms and educational practice.

A study in the United States reported by Cian Brown, Evan Smarinsky, Danny McCarty and David Christian about infusing a mountain biking programme with adventure therapeutic elements for students aged 11–14 also seeks to disentangle place and others' mediation and to examine the effects of this outdoor experience with or without input from a trained school counsellor through supported reflection. The research design is again quasi-experimental with early adolescent students assigned to either a straightforward mountain biking course run by a school instructor or one that incorporated adventure therapy principles with the counsellor/researcher. Taking place during the pandemic, the intended programme of input was disrupted by lockdown periods and remote learning. However, this situation offered a unique context in which many students reported feeling more isolated and anxious. Thereby, it serendipitously enabled an exploration of potential benefits of therapeutic mountain biking for particular challenges to wellbeing. The researchers found these were especially acute for those from marginalised backgrounds. Their follow-up data suggest that the therapeutic input of the enhanced programme group added value in terms of long-term generalised resilience and wellbeing benefits, while both groups reported improved proficiency in riding and maintaining bikes.

In the next article, authors from South Australia, Nicole Miller, Saravana Kumar, Karma Pearce and Katherine Baldock focus on the perceived benefits and barriers to nature-based play and learning for primary aged children according to staff in primary schools in that state. Their research method, an online staff survey, places the focus on 'others' in the position to promote use of school outdoor spaces and ensure access to the outdoors for a greater proportion of children, capitalising on its health and wellbeing promotion possibilities. While there is broad agreement about these benefits, staff report barriers such as teacher confidence and crowded curricula. This study also revealed that a few school and teacher characteristics appeared associated with staff beliefs in the value of or perceived barriers to outdoor learning. For example, urban school staff were more likely to report time as a barrier than those in rural contexts. Significantly more teachers with fewer years of experience reported the barrier 'children's behaviour' but did not identify the benefit of accessibility to many students. These are useful and insightful details for development work. Interestingly, no associations between socioeconomic disadvantage and barriers were identified, mirroring findings of the Natural Connections project in England (Waite, Passy, Gilchrist, Hunt, & Blackwell, 2016), which noted that schools participating and finding value in the outdoor learning interventions were diverse in terms of location, size and demographic profiles. As with the Natural Connections project, Miller and colleagues recommend supportive policies and teacher training are needed for wider implementation.

A completely different angle is adopted in the next paper by Megan Wonowidjoyo, an Art tutor at a university in Malaysia. She supports students in the foundation year of their film studies degree through a fine art and arts history class. Grounded in the presentation of her students' work, she argues that outdoor learning enables engagement with material, social and cultural places to awaken students' critical thinking and personal reflection on identity in their art, moving away from more common technicist reproductive skill demonstration in art education in Malaysia. It is a most unusual article that may serve to trouble hegemonic ideas about outdoor learning. It focuses on specific selected learning spaces as sites for memory making and visceral engagement with complex multicultural social realities in Johor. The examples of paintings also invite us as readers to engage critically with the reflections of student and tutor, so that we can also participate as 'others' in a reflective process.

The final article by Renata Motta and Manuela Ferreira reports on a participant observation study of a nature kindergarten learning community in Portugal and the children's entanglement (literal

and metaphorical) within a bamboo grove. Acknowledging the difficulties of avoiding hierarchical research positioning and resisting human exceptionalism, the researcher waits to be invited into the spaces where the children mingle with non-human inhabitants of their outdoor spaces, away from adult gaze and guidance. The stories show how the interrelationships of place and child are intimate and individual to each child yet are also mediated by the 'permission' of their educators to allow direct exploration, the demonstrated engagement and care for the more-than-human world and by children's social interactions with their peers.

In summary then, this special issue opens a window on some of the many different theoretical and methodological approaches towards clarifying the processes by which child, place, and others interact to co-produce diverse outcomes in different cultural contexts. This level of scrutiny is vital as we face continuing and increasingly pressing global, regional and local challenges. While there is ample evidence of multiple human benefits from outdoor play and learning, we still need greater precision in understanding the associations and interrelationships that maximise benefits and minimise barriers so that conditions can be optimised to enable socially, culturally and environmentally just access for all children whilst respecting the rights and contribution of the more-than-human world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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