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BRIAN SIMON FUND: EDUCATION & DEMOCRACY

Land: what is it for & how do we decide?

A democratic study of children & their families' perspectives

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AUTHOR

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Executive summary

This research project was a case study of one primary class in England and the associated families' ideas about how land in their local area should be used and how conflicts about land use might be resolved. Children participated in a 12-week unit of work about land use rooted in place-conscious pedagogy. They were actively involved in data generation. Data were generated through seven child-led discussion groups with 24 children and through children interviewing 28 adults of their choice. The data were analysed using content and thematic analysis.

The study finds that children and adults have slightly different perceptions of current land uses. Whereas adults mostly perceive land as used for farming, followed by recreational purposes, children perceive land as used for farming and nature. Children and adults suggest there could be small changes to how land is used, including increasing nature in marginal spaces. However, unlike children, adults emphasise concerns about the economic and aesthetic impact of any changes.

The research provides a rich insight into the spectrum of views about who should make decisions about land use. While many participants see ownership as a prerequisite to participation in decision-making, the findings also highlight the complexity of what ownership and belonging mean. For participants in this study, a sense of belonging results from an interplay between a land ethic (Leopold, 1968), legal ownership and autochthony at the hyperlocal level. The benefits and drawbacks of a range of decision-making processes including voting, persuasion and community discussion are highlighted by both adults and children. Here, children's immaturity (Dewey, 1966) results in pertinent critiques of some dominant approaches to decision-making, and children exhibit sagacity about their own limitations. Recommendations are made for policymakers, environmentalists and educators engaged with national parks and the climate emergency.

1. Introduction

The importance of how land is used has been widely acknowledged, including by the United Nations which notes that Article 5 of the Paris Agreement re-emphasises the role land use can play in mitigating climate change. Land is a finite and scarce resource. At global level, there are growing pressures on how land is used. These are set to increase, with Canadell and Schulze (2014) identifying that, by 2050, we will need twice as much land to produce food than currently sits unused. In England, 63.1 per cent of land is used for agriculture (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022), but this is changing, with a move away from focusing on food production (Land Use in England Committee, 2022). Different stakeholders have competing priorities and Goetz et al. (2005) argue that complexity and conflicts arise because of competing public and private interests.

Prior research has explored children's understandings of a range of land-related topics, including their comprehension of science and the environment (Littledyke, 2004); their perceptions of present and future forest environments in Indonesian Borneo (Pellier et al., 2014); and their feelings and conceptions about land use in America (Shepardson, 2019). Building on this body of research, this study looked in-depth at what children and their families in one primary school class in England thought about how land in their local area should be used and explored how they thought conflicts about land might be resolved.

2. Research design

The project explored the following research questions through a collaborative enquiry approach (Savin-Baden & Howell, 2013).

How do children and their families think land in their local area should be used?

How do children and their families think conflicts about land use should be resolved?

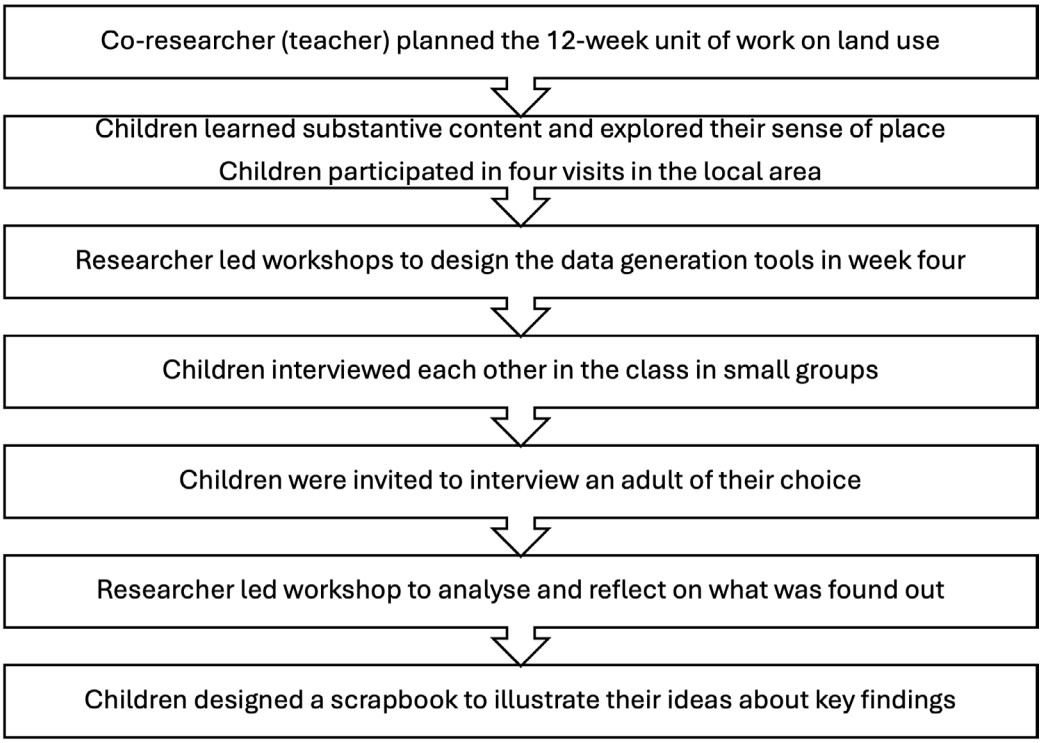
The study eschewed a narrow conceptualisation of children as future citizens in favour of an understanding of them as current citizens within their local community (Lansdown, 2001). As such, they were able to provide important and interesting insights into the use of land and land conflicts within their local community. In line with this, the project sought to employ a range of democratic approaches to data generation to enable one purposefully selected class of 9–10-year-old children to be co-researchers, by exploring the views of their adult family members. The case study school was located in a national park area where land is used for commons, rewilding, farming, agriculture, housing and leisure, exemplifying many of the broader potential conflicts about how land should be used.

The stages of the project are set out in figure 2.1. The class teacher led the design and teaching of a 12-week unit of work about land use and land conflicts. The project took a hyperlocal focus, grounded in the theory of place-conscious education (Gruenewald, 2003). The project thus sought to make the walls of the classroom permeable, opening children and researchers 'to others and the world', most particularly to the local community just beyond the school gates (Greenwood & Smith, 2010, p. xx).

Mindful of Papadopoulou & Sidorenko's (2022, p. 357) warning that 'adults "filter" children's contribution at every stage of the research process', we are cautious of over-stating the extent to which data generation was child-led. However, major efforts were made to actively involve children. The researcher ran an initial workshop with children to identify the topics and questions the data generation tools should explore. A second workshop focused on children learning interview skills. Twenty-four children then chose to take part in small discussion groups, which they led and managed, deciding who should ask each question and using follow-up questions with minimal adult interference. There were seven group discussions lasting 10–20 minutes with three to four children in each. Children who wished took home an audio-recording device to interview an adult of their choice. Some children chose to interview multiple adults, resulting in 17 children conducting 28 interviews of between seven and 25 minutes. One limitation to the data generation was that, while we sought to be democratic, the research was conducted in the context of a school, where there are pre-existing norms about children's participation in activities and deeply rooted power dynamics between adults and children. However, the minimal adult involvement in the discussions does appear to have generated frank and rich data.

Having conducted an initial analysis of the data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the researcher shared emerging findings with the children, who created scrapbook pages to illustrate their own interpretations of key themes and to reflect on their involvement with the research project (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008). The project received ethical approval from the University of Cumbria's research ethics panel and the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants and parents/carers. In the analysis below, children are identified by their discussion group (DG) and adults and children have been allocated numbers.

Figure 2.1
Key stages of the research project



3. Findings & discussion

3.1 HOW IS LAND CURRENTLY USED?

Initially, children and adults discussed their perceptions of land use in the local area. Content analysis shows children most often talk about land being used for farming and nature. Tourism and recreational use were next most frequently mentioned. Children often connected the importance of farming with the provision of food, but also sometimes identified the role of nature within farming: 'and without nature you won't have farming and then otherwise without farming you wouldn't have food' (discussion group 4, child 1 [DG4, C1]). In contrast, adults most frequently highlighted farming, followed by recreational use. Nature, tourism and residential use were then all mentioned with similar frequency. Adults tended to acknowledge the need for multiple land uses but often noted farming as most important because 'farming produces food for us all to eat' (adult 12 [A12]). The identification of farming as the most prominent form of land use aligns with the wider picture in England, where this constitutes 63.1 per cent of current land use (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). However, the second most common use of land in England is forestry, open land and water (20.1 per cent). This potentially highlights how participants' perceptions of key land uses are particularly shaped by what they see in the local area.

3.2 SHOULD WE MAKE CHANGES TO LAND USE?

All participants were asked whether changes to land use were needed. A central theme was reluctance about major land use changes. Children typically initially proposed small changes such as 'adding a tiny bit more nature' (DG3, C2). Adults similarly often began by stating that there was a good balance in current land usage. Regarding any possible changes to use, the theme of land as both economically and aesthetically important was prominent in the data. Adults and children recognised the economic significance of the land for farmers, and for tourists who visit the area because of how the land looks and the experiences it offers. Relatedly, adults were reluctant to propose changes to land use which might affect local people's income sources. Here, ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) emerged over whether farming is beneficial for the land because it maintains the expected aesthetic of the landscape or whether it is detrimental to the land because it negatively affects nature and wildlife. For example, A10 described how 'the land needs to be farmed in order to preserve the beautiful landscape' for tourists. Whereas A16 suggested creating spaces 'where sheep can't graze so it can allow trees and shrubs to grow'.

There were also debates about whether to create more spaces for nature. Children proposed a wide range of practical ideas about how spaces for nature could be slightly increased. They thought this should be balanced with using the land for farming/agriculture. Their ideas included creating peat bogs and ponds, using spare fields for hay meadows, and adapting farming practices to be more sustainable, such as reducing the use of chemical fertilisers or undertaking hedge planting. While adults also proposed many changes to land use which could support nature, in the majority of cases, these were in marginal spaces: 'maybe those fields could have a border with more trees' (A16). A small number of adults condemned current farming practices as 'detrimental to the land' (A14) and proposed more radical changes to support the regeneration of the landscape.

When asked to explore more hypothetically, through a 'magic wand question' (Way et al., 2015, p. 723), adult and child participants were more ambitious in their proposals. The authors note that these can give people agency to think outside practical constraints. When asking people what they would do if the land belonged to them, children and adults proposed increasing accessibility within the landscape for disabled and elderly people, placing cafes on mountains, and suggested how nature could be increased in the landscape in more substantial ways.

3.3 WHO SHOULD DECIDE?

The theme of belonging, touched on above, was extremely significant in responses to the question of who should decide how land is used. Although there was broad consensus between participants that, if land belongs to you, you should get a major say in how it is used, the contributions to this study show the complexity of what belonging really means. This is in line with Antonsich's (2010) analysis of the wide range of ways in which belonging may be created and experienced. Perhaps most straightforwardly, many adults and children emphasised that private ownership leads to a right to decide: 'they've bought the land and they get to decide what they want to do with it' (DG1, C3).

However, a range of other factors were attributed to creating a sense of belonging, which confers rights to decide how land is used. Some highlighted ideas that resonate with autochthonic understandings of land (Geschiere, 2009). At the same time, while there was support for open access to the local area, boundaries were drawn between local people and outsiders such as tourists and visitors, who are 'not part of the proper community' (DG7, C2), and government which was seen as physically and epistemically removed. Although not all local people are legal landowners, they were often considered as having a stronger attachment to the land than other groups. Small numbers of adults and children also problematised the entire concept of land ownership in line with Leopold's (1968) land ethic, asking whether land 'really belongs to people?' (A11) or emphasised the impact of local land use on the climate. Rather than allocating decision-making to one group, participants engaged with the interplay between this multiplicity of sources of belonging when considering who should decide how the land is used.

On the whole, while suggesting they should have some degree of a say themselves, children exhibited sagacity about the limitations of their own perspectives. They gave examples of how children aged zero to five might be unreliable, blindly following their parents' ideas. They also proposed that children their own age (9 to 10 years) should get a say in issues which directly affect them but acknowledged they might not know about every issue: 'we shouldn't get the largest say because as children we are less experienced' (FG1, C4). Discussion groups four and five both proposed that children over 12 should get more of a say in decision-making, and two groups explored whether children of any age, but with strong opinions, should have a say. Three groups identified themselves as 'the future' and, hence, worthy of having a say. This provides an interesting contrast to the arguments from Christiano (2001) that children do not have an advanced sense of their own interests nor that they adopt parental ideas out of a desire to trust their parents. Some children in this study appeared aware of some of their own limitations and put forward parameters within which they could get a say. The findings from this aspect of the study thus lend empirical support to Nishiyama's (2017) analysis of how deliberative democratic activities might enable children to play an important, self-aware role in democracies.

3.4 HOW SHOULD CONFLICTS ABOUT LAND USE BE RESOLVED?

A wide range of approaches to decision-making were mentioned including voting, community discussion, government payments, education, compromise and enforced change. Many adults were keen to emphasise the importance of those in disagreement being able to hear each other's perspectives and often suggested community discussion as a positive decision-making option. However, adults did not readily highlight any drawbacks to this and tended to emphasise that having a say was important even if, as discussed above, those to whom the land belongs should be the ultimate decision-makers.

In contrast, children were more candid about the experience of having a say than adults. While many children mentioned voting as a decision-making mechanism, they also emphasised that, if you have a say but your idea does not win through, this is disappointing and frustrating: 'if you vote then people are still gonna be angry if they don't get what they want' (DG3, C2). Here, the children's perspective brings into sharp relief the experience of participation in democratic decision-making, highlighting that decision-making processes can feel tokenistic. Some children, therefore, suggested that compromise and talking could be more beneficial means of making decisions. However, children in two discussion groups noted that persuading people can sometimes amount to manipulating them into changing their mind. Here, Dewey's (1966 [1916]) proposal that immaturity might be misconstrued as a negative or deficiency, when its literal meaning refers to the power of growth, is insightful. Applying this thinking, children in this study appear to shine a light on the downsides of decision-making processes which adults often put forward as unproblematic.

4. Concluding remarks

In line with Geertz's (1996, p. 262) observation that 'no one lives in the world in general', by adopting a hyperlocal focus, this study has provided an in-depth portrait of children and their families' ideas about land use and decision-making about land in their local area. The unit of work which was developed and taught as part of this research project provides a contrasting exemplar to models of education which are 'increasingly placeless' (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620). Children's views and involvement were seen not only as important and instructive but also as instrumental in the conduct of the project. Involving children as co-researchers who interviewed family members opened up dialogue about a topic that is sometimes experienced as contentious and thorny. In addition, their uninhibited discussions with each other and frankness with adults provided insightful critiques into taken-for-granted assumptions about decision-making processes.

One key finding from this study is the empirical insights gained into how children can make sensible and incisive contributions to discussions and decision-making about land use. Their contributions show how they are self-aware of their own limitations as decision-makers. Policymakers could take heed of this in future considerations about whether to involve children in consultations about related topic areas. Second, although belonging has received much attention in relation to the topic of migration in our increasingly globalised world (Delanty et al., 2011), this study draws attention to the complexities of what it means for land to belong to people at the local level in England. Belonging does not solely result from legal ownership of land but from the interplay between a range of factors which are constructed as creating proximity to the land: autochthony at the hyperlocal level, legal ownership, attachment of local people and, in some cases, questions linked to whether the land belongs to anyone at all (Leopold, 1968). If the climate emergency demands changes to land use, this study calls attention to the benefits of further research about adults' and children's experiences of belonging in their local area, and how this relates to their willingness to permit and encourage changes to land use.

RESOURCES

Scrapbook created by the children: https://bit.ly/3UjRfDf

Toolkit for teachers: https://bit.ly/44dKSF6

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