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New BERA SIG: Nature, Outdoor Learning and Play

Tracy Hayes and Mark Leather

Co-convenors

The strategic priority of the Nature, Outdoor Learning and Play (NOLAP) special interest group (SIG) is to encourage educational research into nature, outdoor learning and play across the lifespan, by engaging in critical dialogue about the health, wellbeing and educational benefits available through a broad range of activities, contexts and locations. Extensive outdoor learning research is taking place in the UK that is of special interest to researchers and educational professionals alike – and through the activities of this SIG we aim to bring this together in a cohesive way.

The establishment of this SIG is timely, given the announcement in January 2019 of £10 million in funding provided through the government's Children and Nature Programme. This initiative aims to help support more children from deprived areas of England to have the opportunity for experiences in nature (DfE et al., 2019). Furthermore, in February the government announced £9.70 million for local authorities to improve their parks and green spaces, with an additional £2.75 million confirmed for the 'pocket parks plus' programme and £1.2 million invested in the National Trust and the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Future Parks Accelerator initiative (MHCLG, 2019).

This new policy-driven funding highlights the need for more awareness of nature and outdoor learning within the world of educational research. Outdoor learning is a broad term that includes discovering, experimenting with, learning about and connecting to the natural world. Traditional forms of engagement with the outdoors, such as Scout Association, Outward Bound and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, remain part of the educational landscape. Similarly, nature study and natural history provide ways of learning about the outside world and understanding our place within it, as is clear from the educational work of organisations such as Plantlife, the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Woodland Trust.

Notable contemporary initiatives include the Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network, which aims to support learners to discover more about nature on their doorstep, and the phenomenally successful book *The Lost Words* by author Robert Macfarlane and artist Jackie Morris which, with accompanying educational resources developed by the John Muir Trust, is, the Trust says, 'set to bring literacy and nature to the fore in education settings across the UK'. A recent petition to the government called for the development of a GCSE in natural history, and the *People's Manifesto for Wildlife* was launched in September 2018 by Chris Packham (Packham, Barkham, & Macfarlane, 2018).

This new SIG will create a forum for academics, practitioners and students to come together to engage critically in debates around nature, and will make a significant contribution to knowledge development and exchange.

The NOLAP SIG will be officially launched at a one day event at the University of Cumbria's London campus on Tuesday 2 July. Speakers Tim Gill and Liz Wood will draw on their work to help attendees consider how to expand the horizons of children, young people and adults through NOLAP, concentrating particularly on the natural world on our doorstep. We will discuss how to expand our understandings of NOLAP through pedagogy and research, with a focus on the illumination of complexity.

References

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