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Evidencing Atmospheres and Narratives: Measuring the Immeasurable?

As outdoor educators and researchers, we face many challenges. Not least of which is the need to evidence the impact of our work. How do we do this with something as ephemeral and tenuous as *Hauntings or Aesthetics or Atmospheres* – what about when we *sense a presence* that is not physically present?ⁱ Can we really claim that narratives and storytelling are valid forms of research? What about being *robust*?ⁱⁱ Whilst we welcome initiatives that highlight the importance of spending time outdoors, and seek to nurture young people’s connection with nature, we believe that many research projects are attempting to *measure the immeasurable*.ⁱⁱⁱ It is one thing to co-construct a way of thinking about our outdoor practice so that new understandings of atmospheres and narratives engender curiosity, raise cultural sensitivity and enrich our outdoor practices. It is a very different thing to show how this is achieved. Given the increasing importance of ‘impact’ in relation to both academia and practice, we ask a number of questions, including: a) What does impact really mean, and who is ‘impacted’? b) How do we want our research to be used, and who do we want to read/act on it? We will explore the apparent need to measure, quantify and statistically signify concepts that are arguably better suited to interpretative practices. We will discuss the contentious nature of the word ‘impact’ and propose that ‘influence’ is preferable for concepts that change with each situation, individual and environment. Is this type of work truly *measurable*?

i Loynes, C. (2015) Email to Tracy Hayes, 27 March.

ii Bragg, R.; Wood, C.; Barton, J. and Pretty, J. (2013) Measuring connection to nature in children aged 8 - 12: A robust methodology for the RSPB. Essex: Essex Sustainability Institute and University of Essex.

iii Chia, J. Measuring the immeasurable? Diss. Bond University, 2006. Available from: <http://www.pria.com.au/sitebuilder/resources/knowledge/asset/files/2/measuringtheimmeasurable-joychia.pdf> Last Accessed: 17/01/2017.

Goleman, D., ed. (2008) Measuring the Immeasurable: The Scientific Case for Spirituality. Boulder, USA: Sounds True Inc.

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Heather Prince is Associate Professor of Outdoor and Environmental Education and Principal Lecturer in Collaborative and Experiential Learning at the University of Cumbria. She is particularly interested in innovative and inspiring pedagogies to enhance student experiences through active outdoor and experiential learning with research connected teaching.