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## **We're ALL in the Wild: Inclusive, creative ways to support young people to discover local outdoor spaces.**

The purpose of this paper is to encourage a critical conversation about opportunities for learning in local outdoor spaces that are accessible to a range of abilities and interests. It was written before the global Covid-19 pandemic, which further highlighted disparities between those who have access to nearby accessible greenspaces and those who do not. The discussion presented here is broader than our response to Covid-19, and is focused on the need for reflective practice. This is based on findings from my doctoral research, which took a transdisciplinary, storied approach to explore young people's relationships with nature (Hayes and Prince, 2019). Transdisciplinarity draws on knowledge from disciplines relevant to specific research issues (Leavy, 2016) and views knowledge-building and dissemination as a holistic process that requires innovation and flexibility. It thrives on creativity, looking at, and thinking about things in a different way, with the purpose of doing things differently. As educators, it is important to reflect on what we do, why we do it, what it is that we are trying to achieve and with whom. One way to do this is through critically creative conversations - with ourselves (through reflection) and with others - as I am doing in this paper. Before reading further, please think about an adventure you had outdoors as a child. Where did you go - how local was it to where you lived? What did you do? Who was with you - what was their role? What was your inspiration for doing this - why did you go outside? Please hold on to these reflections on your own experiences as we move on to consider the experiences of those who participated in my research.

### **Aims**

The aim of my research was to identify effective ways of addressing concerns about both the health and wellbeing of children, and that of our environment, aligned to contemporary issues such as childhood obesity, poor mental health, and lack of engagement with/poor understanding of the natural world. It is important to note that Defra's 25-year plan (DEFRA, 2018) and Public Health England's Strategic Plan (PHE, 2016) emphasise that our approach to healthy lifestyles is shaped by our early experiences and the environment around us. However, our experiences also inform the way we teach, hence the need for reflection. As Brookfield (2017, p153) explains the "... roots of why we teach the way we do are found in a complex web of formative memories and experiences of learning". In my previous roles as a youth and community development worker, educator of youth workers and teacher in lifelong learning and skills, and in my current roles as a lecturer and researcher, much of my work has focused on how we can work together to protect places, and the people, animals and plants found there. This intersects education, informal education/youth work,

conservation/environmental education and outdoor learning, each with their own pedagogical practices. It also traverses the worlds of child development, pre-school and primary education, family learning/development and lifelong learning.

In recent years there has been a transformation in the scope and range of projects (both within and outside of schools) available to young volunteers, to include more of a focus on social action and community cohesion, sustainable development, climate change, regeneration, health and wellbeing. Working collaboratively with community-based organisations, I considered a range of facilitated programmes across England that offered learning opportunities outdoors, explored young people's perceptions of their experiences and talked with educators who designed and/or delivered the programmes. The programmes aimed to build confidence in learning outdoors, with some opportunities offered in school grounds initially, before moving into local parks. Activities included: sensory woodland experiences, natural art, bird/ bat box making, habitat discovery, bat walk and willow weaving.

## **Methods**

My method for eliciting data was based on viewing young people's relationship with nature through four lenses: literature; practitioners; young people and me. This is an approach recommended by Brookfield (1995/2017) and endorsed by Bassot (2016) for critically reflecting on teaching practice, to enable us to examine our assumptions and values, and to identify the power inherent in situations. My methods included a combination of auto/ethnographic reflections, anecdotes, memories and 'magic moments' (Hayes and Prince, 2019), plus qualitative data from participant observations, informal interviews and focus groups.

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed to create written text, followed by interpretive analysis using open coding and inductive reasoning to identify themes/issues to form stories. Where possible, stories were first checked with research participants for accuracy of interpretation and authenticity, then shared with a range of audiences including young people, practitioners, teachers and academics. In this way, "... creativity was used for self awareness and knowledge development as well as for making personal stories public, open to (...) scrutiny (...) and enabling resonances to occur" (Horsfall and Titchen, 2009, p 153).

I present my findings in the form of short stories with the explicit aim of encouraging participation and critical thinking. I will share one of those stories here, as I argue that we need to look carefully at the outdoor educational opportunities we offer to ensure that there is sufficient time and space for them to be inclusive, meaningful and effective. So, if you are sitting comfortably, I will begin...

### **Wind Dancer**

*"Come and sit down, I've told you three times... can't have you dancing whilst others are busy doing things."* Hearing the words of the teacher, I look to see the cause for concern. One of the boys is slowly turning circles in the middle of the path. He is wearing his coat as a cape over his shoulders, his arms extended, face turned towards the sky. Mesmerised, I watch the wind lifting his cape as he turns. I see raindrops land on his cheeks and on the palms of his hands, and run off in little streams. I notice the peaceful calm expression on his face. I am tempted to join him. *"Sit down, you'll get in someone's way."* Jolted from my reverie by the words of the teacher, my gaze widens to take in more of the playground. No-one is nearby. Most of the students and their teachers are huddled in the shelter. Some of them are beginning to grumble about the rain, the wind and the cold. *"Sit down now."* The boy stops turning and walks over to join the others.

### **Discussion**

This story was created from a combination of in-the-moment field notes and reflections. The young man in the story was in his early teens and attended specialist provision. He was similar to many of the young people who participated in the learning programmes I visited. The participants were predominantly from groups who may be identified as marginalised (oppressed), for example: young people in care; young parents; young people identified as at risk of exclusion from school; young people not in education, employment or training; young people accessing targeted support due to issues within their families; young people with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) or special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND). As my research progressed it became clear that SEND schools in particular tend to have limited opportunity to access local greenspaces such as parks and greenspaces.

After sharing my initial findings, I was commissioned by a conservation charity to develop guidance on how to work effectively outdoors in local spaces with young people identified as SEND (Hayes, et al, 2016). The guide was created as a practical aid to assist practitioners who work with young people to support them to discover their local outdoor spaces, and to assist practitioners who work in outdoor spaces to support them to work with young people. It is important to understand both of these perspectives and to encourage collaborative practice, as it is not easy to be skilled at both practical conservation activities (environmental needs) and working with young people with SEND (human needs).

Findings from my research emphasised the need to include outdoor learning in teacher education, whatever the specialism: SEND, early years, primary, secondary, lifelong learning, community, and youth work (Hayes, 2017). On many school visits, I was surprised to see that despite knowing the plan was to take students outside, neither teachers nor pupils had outdoor footwear/clothes, only their usual indoor attire (including soft, fabric shoes). Concerns about weather, struggles to find the

'right' person to sign off risk assessments and give consent to leave the school grounds meant that often we had to stay within the school grounds - even when the park was only the other side of a fence. This limited what we could do: the trees available were mostly small and had been purposely planted; grassy areas were often small, muddy in places. In contrast, nearby parks and greenspaces offered more diverse and engaging learning opportunities - more room to move around. When participants' footwear/clothes were unsuitable, we had to further restrict activities to ensure their safety. Whilst there is an understandable need to protect and prevent harm, this can be overly time-consuming and unnecessarily restrictive.

When we did make it outdoors, it became apparent that most participants (adult and child alike) relaxed, for example, turning their faces to the sun and laughing about being like plants. We had conversations about feeling the wind, hearing the leaves rustle, the smells around us. Activities were designed to allow each young person to have their own experience within the wider group's activities, and tended to be more relaxed, informal and relatively unstructured than when we were inside. And yet, not all teachers could see the importance of this: like the teacher in the story they preferred to stay indoors, with more control over activities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper argues for reflective practice that acknowledges we are in a position of power that impacts on others' access to outdoor spaces. We need to question the foundations of our practice and challenge ourselves to consider different ways of doing things – as indeed we have been forced to do by recent events. It is important to provide opportunities for children and young people (and adults) to be outside, to play, as this helps them learn to negotiate the social world. These opportunities should enable playfulness, spontaneity, freedom, space, creativity and imagination. Schools and colleges should have sufficient external space – or easy access to it – to allow for everyday play and adventures. This should be normalised, part of everyday life, not seen as something special or extra. Perhaps most importantly, my research demonstrated that there is a need for young people (and staff) to be able to relax, de-stress and find some peace outside in a way that is meaningful for them. Like the boy in the story, to have the space and time to dance in the wind, once in a while.

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