

Messing about in the environment – the foundations of living geography?

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In this article Gyles extols the unparalleled experience of engaging with the wilderness.

Have your pupils ever walked blindfolded and barefoot through a little muddy stream and then written a poem about their experience? Have they ever been out to the local environment, written a haiku about what stimulates their senses, and then taken photographs to try and illustrate their poems capturing the essence of that place? Have they cut a fresh stick from the hedgerow, carved it beautifully, and then set out, map in hand, for a real adventure into new territory with the excitement of finding their own way? Have they ever laid on their back watching the clouds rolling by, or watching the stars, while listening to a story?

An early memory of mine was when we had a rare snowfall at school. I must have been seven and I wanted to find a way for my teacher to let me play all morning in the snow. So I asked her if I could build a snowman and measure how high it was for my maths lesson. Being an enlightened teacher she let the whole class outside to do maths in the snow (I remember very few other maths lessons!). Similarly, I was always looking for an excuse to go on an adventure, picnic in hand, with my brother during the holidays; off all day in the woods and hills of Hampshire. I don't want to paint a picture of 'it was so much better when I was young' because all of these experiences could easily be repeated with children today.



Photos: Gyles Morris.

Within the space of a few decades, however, the way children experience and understand nature has radically changed. It seems that children today are becoming more keenly aware of issues such as global warming, melting polar ice caps and rainforest destruction. At the same time, their physical experience, their intimacy and immersion in nature is rapidly fading. This is worrying. In schools the, 'Learning Outside the Classroom initiative' is desperately trying to encourage more outdoor experiences for children. In some areas, forest schools are underway. But in reality, problems with a lack of curriculum time, expertise or a negative emphasis and attitude towards risk assessments act as a barrier in school. At home, cautious parental attitudes to 'stranger danger', busy roads and responses such as 'don't do that you'll get muddy or wet' are severely limiting children's outdoor play and learning opportunities. We are losing the incentive to enable children to explore and discover their world for themselves through the 'primary experience' – that which we can see, feel, taste, hear, or smell for ourselves. Are we beginning to lose the ability to experience our world directly?

'Nature-deficit Disorder' is a phrase used by Richard Louv in his book *The Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2010) to describe the costs of alienation from nature. It is not a medical term but it does offer a way to think about the problem and the possibilities for children, and for the rest of us as well. From a sustainability perspective, we need to have a deep appreciation of nature, to experience the awe and wonder of the natural world, to develop a confidence about it and develop a positive relationship with it before we can take on a caring and responsible attitude towards it.

'Our connection to the 'natural world' is critical. We depend upon it to enhance and develop our sense of place, sense of belonging and sense of identity. It is fundamental to our well-being' (Cooper *et al.*, 2006). Children need a range of experiences in the natural world to develop their senses and gain new understandings and skills. They can be creative. They can be playful. They can be messy. There is magic when young people and those beyond childhood are exposed to even the smallest direct experience of the natural setting. Like walking in the woods at night

without a torch or lying in a flower rich meadow finding faces and shapes in the clouds. After years of delivering approaches in outdoor education, designing and building school grounds and working with students in initial teacher training, just observing teachers engaging children in these opportunities is uplifting. So, too, is the realisation that 'hands on' experience can act as a catalyst for discussion and, importantly, the development of responses and responsible behaviour towards the environment. Working recently with a delightful group of PGCE students, feedback comments included:

'Being out and about is far superior to sitting in the classroom.'

'What went well – whenever we went outside. I haven't been out in the rain without trying to run to somewhere dry in years!'

'Great, walking through the dark, dark woods at night!'

There's a message in these statements for all teachers. If you haven't experienced such activities recently why not try to do so? Reconnecting ourselves with nature, the messy, and the great outdoors just might shape what we do with our children.

'The best hope for learning to live sustainably lies in schooling that is "smart by nature". It includes experiencing the natural world; learning how nature sustains life; nurturing healthy communities; recognizing the implications of the ways we feed and provision ourselves; and knowing well the places where we live, work, and learn. Teachers are in a prime position to be able to weave these basics throughout the curriculum at every grade level' Stone (2009).

This thought led me to establish Naturesbase Camp, an environmental education camping centre dedicated to engaging children with the natural environment, situated on our small farm in west Wales. This is where children are able to become immersed in the environment, living through their senses. They might taste leaves directly from the salad garden, listen to the kites and buzzards cry overhead or the bleat and grunt of the sheep and pigs. They can feel the water between their toes and



Photos: Gyles Morris.



shriek with joy as they go on a blindfold barefoot walk through the small shallow stream. They squeeze mud between their fingers as they build cob bricks for our latest sustainable building and smell the thick odour of rotting vegetation as they empty the compost bucket every morning. And, finally, they are drawn towards the comforting smell of a campfire when they know it's time for hot chocolate, marshmallows and creative stories. There is a last look at the bats in the starry sky before resting their heads, snuggled against the curves of the earth, listening to the distant sound of owls calling.

When we record the important events in pupils' Naturesbase passports (a diary), creativity flows. Teachers often comment that pupils who struggle to find words in a formal setting are now bursting to express their feelings as a result of a day of 'hands on' experiences. Sensory experiences link the pupils' exterior worlds with their interior, hidden, affective worlds. We also see how engagement in natural spaces and contact with natural materials stimulate their limitless imaginations and serve as the medium of inventiveness and creativity.

Since the natural environment is the principle source of sensory stimulation, opportunities to explore, learn and play with the outdoor environment through their senses are essential for pupils' personal well-being. A stimulating range of direct experiences with the natural world is also vitally important in developing future citizens with knowledge and skills to make informed choices in, for, and about, the environment. A rich, open environment will continuously present alternative choices for engagement. A rigid, bland environment

will limit healthy growth and development of the individual or group. At Naturesbase we also believe that diverse and stimulating school grounds can replicate some of the experiences we provide in the outdoors. If you total up the hours spent on play and lunch times during an average school education between age 4 and 16, it equates to approximately three years. That is three years of potential deep engagement with the natural world. If we give children the opportunity, they will.

Further details of Gyles's work with Naturesbase can be found by following the weblink.

Bibliography

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More information about Naturesbase: www.naturesbase.co.uk

The Learning Outside the Classroom initiative: www.lotc.org.uk

The new GA CPD 'My Place, Your Place, Our Place' is a wonderful resource focussing on a better understanding of how quality geography can contribute to excellence and enjoyment, the wider curriculum and whole school ethos: www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/onlinecpd/myplaceyourplaceourplace/

The Center for Ecoliteracy: www.ecoliteracy.org/teach





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