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Engaging With Place: Playground Practices For Imaginative Educators

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Abstract

This article explores one aspect of a pedagogy called Imaginative Ecological Education (Judson, 2015, 2010). Interweaving reflection and practice, it focuses on the principle of "Place" and the process of place-making by describing some learning tools that all educators can employ to connect their students with the natural world. The article concludes with a few examples from a teaching resource called a "Walking Curriculum" that exemplify imagination-focused place-based practices.

Keywords: *place-based practices, Imaginative Education, Imaginative Ecological Education, place-making, walking curriculum, learning tool, natural world, relationality, biophilia, wonder.*

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We learn a place and how to visualize spatial relationships, as children, on foot and with imagination. Place and the scale of place must be measured against our bodies and their capabilities. (Snyder, 1990, pp. 98-99)

Human beings are place-makers (Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b). Everyone everywhere ascribes meaning to the spaces of their daily lives. Places are defined by the fact that we have a relationship with them. Places are meaningful because they evoke emotional response; we feel something about them. The emotional meanings we ascribe to the contexts of our lives are significant for us—they have always been so—as they help us to situate ourselves in the world and to feel a sense of belonging.

Research shows that meaningful experiences in nature as children can impact the development of a conservation ethic (deBrito *et al.*, 2017; Fisher-Maltese, 2016; McClain & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2016; Selby, 2017; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Unfortunately, not all outdoor learning experiences are created equal. Practices that neglect emotional and imaginative engagement in the learning process do little to cultivate the heart of a conservation ethic (Judson, 2010, 2015). With the aim of developing students' ecological understanding, an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and a sense of care/concern for the natural world, we can teach in ways that afford our students' emotional connections with their local natural and cultural contexts. We can support our students in developing a "sense of place", a personal relationship with their natural/cultural context as well as a certain depth of knowledge about it.

This article introduces Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) (Judson, 2015, 2010). IEE is a cross-curricular approach to teaching that combines three elements in learning: *Feeling* (engagement of emotion and imagination), *activeness* (involvement of the body), and *place* (a focus on the natural, local world). The article specifically looks at a resource called the "Walking Curriculum" that exemplifies imagination-focused place-

based learning. Interweaving reflection and practice, this article aims to how all educators can support meaningful, and life-changing, learning opportunities for their students in the natural world.

Engage Students with Place: Imaginative Ecological Education Pedagogy

When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new possibilities. (Horowitz, 2013, p. 13)

Imaginative Ecological Education, or IEE, is an approach to teaching that brings the emotional and imaginative engagement of the child to the center of theory and practice (Judson, 2015, 2010). IEE is centrally concerned with students' engagement with knowledge and with the natural world of which they are part.

Emotional and imaginative engagement in IEE is achieved through the use of a "cognitive tools" approach to teaching. You will notice later that each walking theme is paired with an activity to evoke the imagination. These are examples of "cognitive tools" or learning tools.

Cognitive Tools and Imaginative Education

Our students frequently and routinely think about the world in ways that evoke their emotions and imaginations. For example, they universally enjoy stories or narratives of all kinds. They all enjoy jokes and humor. They all identify patterns in the world around them. Many are fascinated by extremes of experience and limits of reality, the stuff in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Many associate with heroes and even idolize people, ideas, or institutions. Many start collecting things and obsess over hobbies. Words cause images to arise in all of their minds. They all enjoy a good mystery and can be left awestruck by unanswered questions or strange events. Older students may enjoy abstract

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ideas and theories that represent them. Some seek ways to enact change in their environments. I could go on and on, our students' emotional and imaginative lives manifest themselves in many varied ways.

These different forms of engagement are not insignificant, they are actually ways of thinking that help human beings learn. In *Imaginative Education*, a pedagogy developed by Dr. Kieran Egan from Simon Fraser University, these features of our imaginative lives are "cognitive tools", they are emotional ways human beings make meaning in the world. Dr. Kieran Egan's theory of Imaginative Education offers all educators a glimpse into the imaginative and emotional lives of their students. He outlines the particular sets of tools students are using to make emotional sense of the world and how any teacher can use these same tools to shape curriculum. For more information on cognitive tools please click here.

Place-Making Tools

One of the main principles of IEE is that we can incorporate into our teaching many opportunities for learning that connect students imaginatively and emotionally with the natural world. Specifically, we build a sense of place through what I call "place-making tools".

There are at least three place-making tools that may be employed to nurture students' sense of relationship to their natural contexts. Whether it be in the baby's initial sensory explorations of the world (*the sense of relation tool*), the young child's emotional connection to a favourite "stuffy", blanket, or to some other object, process or person (*the formation of emotional attachments tool*), or the older child's interest in creating forts and hide-outs (*the creation of special places tool*), human beings actively engage their imaginations and emotions in building a sense of place. Place-making tools will take a prominent place in the imaginative ecological educator's toolkit, supporting ecological understanding through increased knowledge of and connection to place.

A Sense of Relation

We are born with a body that is equipped with "tools" for making sense of the world. What drives or inspires human beings to engage the body's tools to engage with the world around them? One might argue that their use is automatic, that we come hard-wired to use our bodies. I suspect there is something else at work, something that contributes to what it means to be human. The body's first and arguably most important place-making tool may be described as the sense of relation: the innate human desire to form relationships and, in this way, to engage with its surroundings (Judson, 2010). Indeed, it may be a sense of relation that actually drives us to employ our body-based learning tools.

Human beings are not only relational animals, but are also innately ecological animals. If one observes babies and young children relating to the world, a particularly ecological dimension of human relationality emerges. The body's innate desire to relate to the world has an ecological dimension. This innate sense of "biophilia," as E. O. Wilson (1984) first called it, is demonstrated in children's fascination with the natural world. Children seem to have an urge to relate to nature and an innate sympathy for natural things. It may be biophilia that informs their sense of participation in the world and their desire to encounter nature. Our sense of relation may be considered the body's tool for place-making, a force that compels us to engage with the world around us. It is out of this sense of relation that other place-making tools may develop.

So what does this mean for teaching? It means we need to encourage children to engage with nature, we mustn't hold them back. We should allow them to get dirty, digging in the sand or dirt is a powerful learning experience. We can see the affinity young children feel for the world around them, they love to experience the world physically. They are figuring out the world and their place in it. They are captivated by its many wonders. They love animals of all kinds and many will jump at the chance to commune with all kinds of living things. To engage and develop the sense of relation place-making tool, teachers can enable and facilitate these many wonder-full interactions.

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The Formation of Emotional Attachments

Children everywhere develop emotional attachments to aspects of the world they encounter on a daily basis. Whether it be objects such as blankets, teddy bears, articles of clothing, toys, particular people, or processes, a child's emotional attachments to features of their immediate environment seem closely tied to their emotional stability. I know many parents (myself included) who would rather lose their wallets than misplace the beloved "binky" or "bear bear." For young children the favorite object often represents a familiar, constant aspect of a "new" environment. The emotional attachment to the object can provide a needed sense of security and belonging (Judson, 2010). Because the object with which children form emotional attachments is often of their own choosing, it may also offer them a sense of control, an initial experience of a sense of autonomy in the world (Judson, 2010). In this sense, then, the teddy bear or other object is a central piece of a child's understanding of place. A child can situate him or herself in the world and gain a sense of belonging when the familiar and beloved object is near.

To include the emotional attachments place-making tool in practice, teachers should consider the following questions in their practice:

- How can students learn about the topic in a way that engages them emotionally and imaginatively with some aspect of the natural world around them?
- How does the topic connect to the local environment?
- What does it mean here?

There are many ways to engage this particular tool in teaching. How a teacher employs this tool will depend, of course, on what she is teaching and where. To support emotional connections with the natural world a teacher should consider how to engage children with natural things. Getting outdoors in any context is, thus, crucial.

A few ideas: provide students with opportunities to "apprentice" to place, to have time to get to know at a personal level some aspect or aspects of their local natural context.

Afford students opportunities to symbolically "adopt" different aspects of the natural world. Use the natural world as an integrative theme for learning. Through opportunities to engage with their senses, to study and observe features of the natural environment, students may strengthen their sense of emotional attachment tool in a way that brings the natural world into focus. The more opportunities children are given to learn experientially, the stronger and the richer their emotional bonds with the natural world can be. A stream, tree, grassy field, or whatever aspect of nature students are studying, may begin in even a small way, to contribute to their sense of place.

Creation of Special Places

Whether it be tree houses perched precariously amongst the branches of neighborhood trees, inviting hollows in dense shrubbery, lean-to structures of scrap material in vacant lots, or a sheltered space under the jungle gym at a nearby park, children everywhere seem to love forts. Sobel's (1993) research suggests just that building or laying claim to special places, what he refers to in his research as forts, dens and bush houses, is a universal dimension of middle childhood. Sobel's (1993) work indicates the emotional significance of special places for children. In addition to helping them situate themselves in the social world, creating special places also assists children in making sense of their natural context. Special places may symbolically protect the child's developing sense of self and may assist the child in the transition to adolescence.

Creating special places, indeed symbolically claiming a space for oneself, can support children in situating themselves in the social and natural contexts in which they live (Judson, 2010). Driven in part by the sense of relation we discussed earlier, and an extension perhaps of the young child's emotional attachment to objects, creating special places supports children in making sense of a broader sense of reality, and their wider physical explorations of it. Creating or laying claim to special places is another way a child can situate him or herself in the world (Judson, 2010). Depending on children's encounters with nature and the contexts in which they have opportunities to create special places, this place-

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making tool has the potential to support children's emotional connections to nature and forge an ecological sense of place in childhood, a crucial time for establishing a long-term sense of care for the natural world. Sobel (1993) goes so far as to situate a concern for nature as adults with children's exploration of nature and creation of special places: "the sense of place is born in children's special places" (p. 161).

Given opportunities to learn about and explore nature, and to create special places in natural contexts, children may not only gain knowledge of their natural context, but may develop emotional connections with it. These kinds of questions can support engagement of this place-making tool:

- What aspect of the topic might be learned in a way that provides students the opportunity to explore the natural world around them?
- How might learning about the topic support a sense of belonging in the natural environment?

A Walking Curriculum

To the child, as to the artist, everything is relevant, little is unseen.
(Horowitz, 2013, p. 76)

I have always felt that schoolyards tend to be underused resources for ecological learning. Perhaps you and your students have not been afforded the time or resources to familiarize and come to a deeper understanding of the place that is your schoolyard. Many teachers have not been given the opportunity to consider how place can contribute to their teaching. Others assume that learning/teaching outside is suitable solely for natural topics, e.g. topics in science or social studies. Fewer still, perhaps, have ever considered how place is, or can be, a co-teacher. So my intentions for this resource are broader than providing teachers with things to do. In the long run I hope to encourage teachers to reimagine what place can contribute to their teaching.

My hope is that images and knowledge of the local natural world will become etched in students' minds. They will come to know each place in great(er) detail and will thus develop emotional connection and a sense of ethical responsibility. Each walk can provide deeper understanding, clarity, richness, and detail to an understanding of place. Like a holographic image, each walk can bring some aspect of the natural world and related curricular knowledge into focus. With increasing clarity, they can also begin to see the wonder in the ordinary world around them.

Why Walks?

Stolnik (2000) claims that a rich sense of place can only be gained and developed via walking. On foot, over time, we can hope to regain some of what we lose as language-using beings. Horowitz (2013) discusses how language rapidly impacts our sense-making and has a profound impact on our understanding/engagement with the world around us. She describes how in the first five years of life it is believed that every two hours children learn a new word. This is remarkable to say the least, but for Horowitz this is also "terrifying". It is "terrifying that every [few] hours a child loses more and more the ability to think without language" … It means that "every hour children are less able to *not* notice words" (my emphasis, p. 59). I appreciate Horowitz's stance that the lack of language is enviable, while language has given human beings unspeakable richness and possibility, it has come at a cost. I hope that we can reengage our bodies with the particularities of the world and, in this way, regain some of the richness we tend to lose.

When I designed this resource I had two aims in mind: one, to develop a sense of place, and two, to enrich understanding of topics and core competencies across the curriculum. It includes a series of walking-based activities that engage student imagination and can cultivate emotional connection with place. Students may walk freely through the schoolyard or predetermined routes around the perimeter of the school grounds or beyond. In the walks described here you will see a variety of themes, perspectives, and motivations. For example, students may be asked to find things (such as shapes, spaces or lines, evidence

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of growth or change, "the best" hiding places), to change perspectives (imagine being a beetle, a detective, or a visitor from outer space), to encounter the world differently (emphasizing one sense over another or moving through space differently), or to seek evidence of human-nature relationships. In all cases, the intent is to deepen awareness of the particularities and meaning of place upon learning.

Note: A defining principle of place-based teaching is richness; practices are diverse. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to place-based education, there simply can't be. Unlike standardized objectives-based curricula that many consider valuable because of its "use anywhere" versatility, place-based teaching and learning reflects its context. Place-based educators are attuned to the different affordances, or opportunities, offered by local natural/cultural contexts for learning and how these relate to the curriculum. Place-based education in Fredericton, Canada, will be distinct from practices in Letterkenny, Ireland, or Nice, France. This Walking Curriculum aims to honor that richness, the walks described are suggestions, they are prompts to support student exploration and they include additional ideas for imaginative and emotional engagement Ultimately teachers and students together will build upon and elaborate this resource through practice and exploration.

10 Sample Walks

I've included ten walking activities in this article—all of the walks are available here. (That link also offers information for preparing students for walking, and notes on how to introduce and follow-up/debrief the walking activities to maximize learning and engagement.)

Here are a few of the "quick and easy" walks readily useable with our youngest learners:

(Sur)Faces Walk: Look for "faces" of all kinds. What (sur)faces do you encounter on the walk? What do you notice about the (sur)faces?

The Senses: What do the surfaces feel like? How do they feel different to the touch of a finger? How do they feel to the touch of your forearm instead of your finger?

Motion Walk: Employ as many of your senses as possible to complete this challenge. What is moving around you? What is on the move? Besides seeing movement, how else can you tell something is moving?

Gesture & Intention: Try to repeat using your body the movements you discovered. Are the movements easy or hard to do/represent? Why?

Line Walks: Find a human-made line. Follow it. Where does it lead? Find a natural line (a track from some animal perhaps). Where does it lead?

Literate Eye: Once you return inside, visualize the lines you followed. Try to draw them. Create a detailed map of your route and what you passed along the way.

History Walk: What evidence can you find on your walk of something that happened here before this moment?

Mental Imagery: Use words to describe in as much detail as possible what you think happened here. Pretend you are a detective, figuring out a situation and you only have a few clues to work with.

Vertical World Walk: Take note of all that pulls your gaze downward and upward. What shapes and spaces fill the in-between world?

Joking & Humor**:** What would it be like to live off the ground? Imagine what school would be like if it was normal to exist above ground. How would games like basketball be played?

Centers Walk: What spaces draw people together? What are some "meeting" points?

Heroic Quality & Gesture: There is a superpower among us! It is called a *centripetal force*. This force has the power to bring people together. Its greatest quality is *connection*. Use your body to pose like this centripetal superhero. How do you pose in a way that shows your power? Now draw this super hero.

Found Objects Walk: What natural objects do you observe? (Focus on things that would fit in the palm of your hand).

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Literate Eye: Classify the objects you find. Consider categories of size or location where they were found. Consider if these objects once moved or were rooted etc.

Wet World/Dry World Walk: How does the world look different when wet? Take note of all the differences you notice.

Senses: The world doesn't just look different when wet. It can also smell different. What does the world smell like after rain? Try to employ very specific words: musty? Mossy? Dank? It is hard to describe smells, do your best.

Birds' Eye View Walk: Ask the students to first imagine that they are majestic eagles, soaring over a mountain range. They see many cliffs, depths for diving, hideouts for nesting. In an urban/suburban environment, our building walls are like cliffs; they allow for swooping and diving and they house wind-free spots for nesting. (Trees, individually and those in groups, also offer needed places for nesting and a sense of depth to the landscape.) Ask students to walk out and around the school and to imagine they are birds soaring over the school, looking down on cliffs and caverns below. What swooping, cavernous places are there on the schoolyard/school grounds? What draws your bird brain attention?

Binary Opposites & Role-Play: Ask students to remain in role as birds. Have them describe how the place can be described as safe and dangerous, hidden and exposed, high and low, closed and open.

And here are two walks designed for older children:

Texture Walk: How Place feels (or feeling Place). For this activity begin in the classroom with a class brainstorm about ways to describe how things feel to the touch: smooth, bumpy, prickly, hot, cold etc. In groups students might be challenged to come up with as many adjectives as they can. (Perhaps assign this task ahead of time, kudos to the student who comes up with the most unusual adjective!) Once a master list has been created you can ask students to head outside to explore. Their challenge is to find something that matches each descriptor on the list. They can record what they find that matches the adjective. Following the walk give students an opportunity to debrief and share what they found. Encourage them

to classify some of the textures which were for example: Pleasing? Surprising? Curious? Unusual? (They can identify additional categories).

Lettering Walk: What squiggles or lines fill this Place? You can start out this activity by saying to students that when they learned to read their brains were rewired. They were infected by a technology that transformed them. As readers, or new readers, they can't not see squiggles as letters when, in fact, squiggles are just squiggles. Tell students that since they learned to read, they can only see these groups of squiggles as words. We can't go back and see the squiggles (letters) as meaningless shapes, as we did when we were babies. Literacy has reprogrammed our minds! (You can prove that squiggles are just squiggles by showing them a different script or alphabet, suddenly they will see squiggles. You might also point out that squiggle is an unusual word, why don't we constantly burst out laughing when we hear the word squiggle? Shouldn't we?) Introduce students to the terms *literophilia* (a love of letters and lettering) and *literophilic* (someone who gets pleasure from letter shapes/design). In this activity students will become literophilics; they will seek out any and all shapes and letter designs. Ask students to walk with their literophilic lenses on. Their task is to identify all the things outside that have letters on them. Ask them to notice the color, style, and shape of the lettering (they could bring paper and pencil and actually sketch it).

Extension: Whether in class or at home ask students to explore different fonts. The ideas you want to convey here are that *design has power* and *language is beautiful*. Design influences how we feel and that, as students know, can influence us. (Consider why marketers care so much about their font!) Font study: Which do they prefer? How would they describe their favorite font? Why do they like it? Which is their least favorite? What is it like? Why don't they like it? What fonts express different emotions, for example: sternness, power, humor, whimsy? Have students classify fonts as either "whisper" or "scream" fonts and to justify their choices. Ask student to identify with a font. Ask: Are you Garamond? Times New Roman? Cambria? Helvetia? (Once they have chosen their font they should a) describe it; b) indicate what emotions it evokes; c) find the story behind

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the font: Where did it come from? Why is it called what it is called? Now turn the conversation to Place. Ask students: If this Place had a font, what would it look like? What would the font be for a tropical rainforest? For a desert? For a river bank? By studying fonts that they can see in the Word computer program, which do they think was inspired by nature? What are the connections?

Concluding Thoughts & Reminders

I hope the article has shown that place-based teaching is not only a project for the rural teacher, but rather for all teachers. Teachers everywhere can help to develop their students' sense of place. Building on the premise that wildness or wild nature is everywhere, and that we are born with an innate sense of connection with nature, there is a potential in all contexts, whether urban, suburban, or rural, to bring the natural context into focus. Is it easier to engage students with nature in rural contexts than in highly urbanized areas? Probably. But even so, in all contexts, it is possible to engage students' sense of wonder—and emotion—with the natural world. Whether in playgrounds, vacant lots, local parks, or in forests, we can afford children opportunities to develop emotional bonds with the natural world and to explore and to create special places as they situate themselves in the world. By doing so, we may nurture students' attachment to place.

I conclude with two thoughts. First a reminder that simply being outside (playing at the playground or playing soccer) or doing things outside (taking "indoor" work outdoors/cleaning up the playground) will not necessarily help students form relationships or any profound emotional connections with nature. It is important, therefore, to try to include opportunities for what Naess (2002) calls "Activeness". Activeness describes a profound internal form of relationship we can cultivate with the natural world that has the most potential impact on our understanding of nature. Rather than a form of physical activity, activeness may be better characterized as "lingering in silence" or as "pause". Our bodily engagement in the world, the attunement of our senses with our surroundings and

the engagement of our sense of pattern, musicality, among other tools of the body, contributes to activeness. Activities that help students focus on the body and focus on the connection of the body to the world can support this emotional relationship. Get some more ideas about developing *attentive* or "body-full" learning in these *Lessons For Living Attentively* or read more about this principle for imaginative and ecological teaching here.

Second, I hope this piece has encouraged you to consider place-making in imaginative terms, we are imaginative and emotional beings after all. Strive, therefore, to pair increased knowledge of place with affective engagement. Allow students opportunities to form specific relationships with particular aspects of the natural world. Over time support them in feeling a sense of closeness with particular natural objects or very specific places. With opportunities to see specific natural objects over the course of a year, and with your guided support, they may be increasingly aware of nuanced changes. They can grow to feel connected to these places.

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I want to acknowledge the different teachers who have inspired this work. First I appreciate what I have learned and continue to learn from simply expanding my awareness to include the natural world around me. I continually strive to practice a more embodied and active receptiveness to the natural world around me when I think about teaching. My ability to re-imagine my place in the world has also been inspired by some of my recent readings. Some are new to me, and others are old favorites:

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