

FROM FOREST SCHOOL TO URBAN SCHOOL

CLAIRE WILLIAMS

In this article Claire discusses the importance of utilising local landscapes (whatever their form) for outdoor education experiences.

The spread of Forest School practice in the UK demonstrates how primary schools today understand the benefits of taking learning outside the classroom, but why should these experiences be primarily in forests? This article examines the perception that geography happens mainly in natural environments. It shows instead how more urbanised local environments can be viewed as natural spaces. These spaces can be utilised for learning experiences that have contextualised place-based learning in mind.

What is nature?

This is a thorny subject, and many have come to realise that the definition of nature is indeed subjective. However, to maximise learning opportunities from urban environments it is important to see how something like a park can be viewed as natural, and, consequently, how humans living in an urban environment are also a part of nature (Figure 1).

A quote from Clarke and McPhie summarises this holistic view of nature well:

‘When... does plankton stop being “nature”? When it has gone through catagenesis and become oil? When the oil is refined into plastic? When the plastic is used in the production of an mp3 player? Either each one of these processes is nature, or none of them are’ (Clarke and McPhie, 2014, p. 208).

Geography, however, is about the inter-relationship between human and natural, and an exploration of this idea can start in your local urban area. It is time for us to move away from a binary view of natural and urban to a more synthesised one. In taking pupils away from schools into so-called ‘wild’ settings for geography fieldwork, we are arguably unwittingly creating a divide between natural wilderness and urban settings. This divide promotes the idea that humans are removed from nature rather than being part of it.

Contextualised place-based learning

Let us talk about some of the benefits for teachers and pupils of using local contextualised place-based learning; which, although differing with school location, will often have urbanised elements.

Distance and accessibility

One benefit of using immediate local environments is the reduced distance that learners have to travel. The immediacy and consequent accessibility of teaching pupils in the school grounds or a nearby park allows for continuity and regularity in lessons. It aids curricular learning through regular local fieldwork, while also building pupils’ relationship with place through progressive experiences in readily accessible locations. Using local environments also negates the need for ‘transfer’ of learning, because being in a place already known by the pupils means any learning is within their frame of reference and is directly relevant to their lives. Pupils will probably already have knowledge and memories of the place. In this way, these experiences are not a special treat or a bolt-on to curricular education, but form part of pupils’ day-to-day learning.

Connection to local environment and nature

Place-based learning allows pupils to develop an understanding of nature through their local environment, culture and history. Using a park as an example, when viewed through the lens of place-based learning, learning and discovery is not just about the concrete, flowers, benches or the play equipment that are there today. It is also about the what the land was formerly: a playing field, a woodland before that; perhaps even the home of fairy-tale woodland creatures for the children who played there 150 years previously, and the stage for a village fête every year. Pupils can explore whether they feel the park is more or less natural now than it was before and why, what its current ecological and social significance is and how this will change in the future.

By exploring their local environments (both physically and through research) pupils learn about their place in the local environment and gain a sense of place over time. Additionally, distant concepts or places can be contextualised through local knowledge; Yellowstone National Park may not seem so ‘other’ when compared with pupils’ local parks. This is about working from the inside out. Local place-based learning enables other place-based learning to be grounded with an existing frame of reference. Using a local park as a frame of reference, Figure 2 outlines an activity to start your own Urban School experience.



Figure 1: Seeking nature even in the most urban of local parks. Photo © Taigi/Shutterstock.com

Before the fieldwork, pupils spend one lesson either completing their own a map of the local park, or labelling an existing map.

- Take pupils to the local park with their journals (this can be an exercise book used especially for geography fieldwork). Explain to them that they are going to create a special map of this place: a sensory map of natural and unnatural things.
- Ask individuals to choose their own little area and draw themselves in the middle of a page. Then map this place using one of the senses: what do they hear/see/feel/smell/taste? They can use words or drawings to map their experiences in their journals. Depending on the time available for each session, it may be advisable to do one sense per session; on their return visit pupils find their place and repeat the activity with a different sense each time. Guide their thinking by asking: how does focusing on a specific sense make them feel?

What sound/texture/view/smell makes the place seem natural? Pupils should write down any questions that they have, to discuss later back in the classroom.

- After they have had time to document their part of the park through whichever sense is the focus of the session, pupils pair up and share their map with their peer. This will deepen their understanding of their place and their experience because they will need to find the words, sounds or drawings that explain what they experienced and how it made them feel.

Repeating this activity with different senses and natural/unnatural places (i.e. the playground of a park and an area with trees and grass) will help pupils to gain an initial connection to their place. After this, you may add different 'lenses' through which to explore the area: historical, cultural or future lenses, for example, and of course a geographical lens.

Figure 2: Sensory mapping of a natural/unnatural area.

Conclusion

The case for urban fieldwork is strong: taking your pupils out to learn about their local environment moves geographical education from their own front door and connects pupils with the world beyond. Place-based learning – where learning opportunities come from, rather than are applied to, the context – can be adopted to maximise learning opportunities from the local environment.

Bibliography

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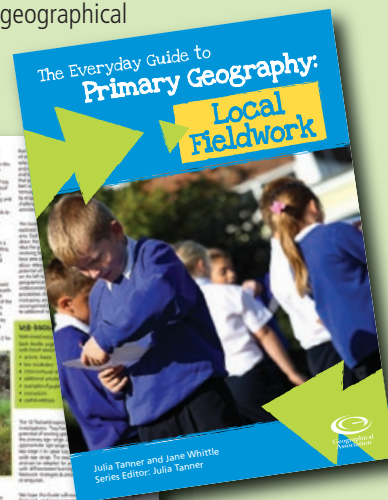
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Claire Williams is an Outdoor Education graduate and environmental enthusiast based in Bristol.

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