

PLACE ATTACHMENTS: A SENSE OF SECURITY

JULIA TANNER

Julia explores the construction and importance of our emotional attachments to place. She also offers ideas to nurture the sense of belonging and security in school that underpins this fundamental aspect of well-being.

Throughout humankind's history, people have actively chosen particular places to settle and live. These choices are usually explained in economic terms – that sites are chosen for the access they offer to valuable resources or economic opportunities. Archaeological research suggests that the first settlements were located where early hunter-gatherers could best exploit resources in the local environment to meet their needs for water, food and shelter. As agriculture developed, people settled sites on fertile land with good access to water and woodland. Towns and cities, dependent on the production of rural surpluses for food, developed on easily defensible sites, along trading routes, at river bridging points or in sheltered estuaries. With industrialisation access to raw materials (such as coal or mineral ores), a labour force and new transport networks (canals, railways, motorways) became more important factors in the location of settlements. Significantly, however, economic considerations are not the only influences that affect why people chose to move to or stay in particular locations. People also develop emotional attachments to places – a sense of belonging, connection and security.

What is place attachment?

Place attachment is a key concept in environmental psychology. Defined as 'the emotional bonds between people and a particular place or environment' (Seamon, 2014, p. 11), it is associated with a sense of security, familiarity and belonging. People express their place attachments in many ways, through the display of images such as calendars or paintings, or verbally (e.g. 'I love Verona, it's my favourite Italian city'). For some people, their sense of identity derives in part from their identification with their town, region or country of birth (e.g. 'I'm a Yorkshire woman, through and through').

How do place attachments develop?

Place attachment appears to develop through significant and positive experiences of, and in, particular places (Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Devine-Wright, 2014). Pre-school children typically develop place attachments to where they spend most of their time, such as home and nursery. In large primary schools, the youngest pupils often have separate outdoor areas, toilets and lunchtimes

and only slowly are they introduced to the whole school building and grounds. Teachers instinctively manage pupils' gradual exposure to places in the school; knowing that unfamiliar places may feel disorientating or even a little intimidating. Thus, if Reception pupils need to take a message to the school office we send them as a pair for mutual support, whereas we expect older pupils to be confident in navigating their way around school independently.



Figure 1: Finding solace in the school grounds' willow den with a good book. Photo © Anna Grandfield.

Place attachment is fostered by activities that create happy memories. As they grow, the range of places children visit expands, and as they experience and explore these places, they begin to develop specific preferences. Asked about places that are 'special' to them, primary-aged pupils habitually nominate places where they have fun, usually with people who are important to them (e.g. 'I love going to Whitby to stay with Grandma, where we play on the beach and are allowed to eat fish and chips outside'). In the early 1990s, both Chawla (1992) and Sobel (1993) found that primary-aged pupils especially valued outdoor spaces (Figure 1), but more recent studies have found that older children are now more likely to nominate their bedrooms as favourite places. What these places have in common are the opportunity to be with friends, free from adult supervision.

Common disruptions to place attachments experienced by primary pupils include moving classroom, school or house. Distressingly, many primary-aged pupils in UK schools have fled persecution or conflict as a refugee. For these children, place attachment disruption is likely to be compounded by the much greater trauma of having been driven from home and country.

Why do place attachments matter?

Attachment theory is increasingly influential in understanding pupils' wellbeing in schools (see Marshall, 2014). Attachment theory emphasises the crucial importance of early childhood interpersonal experiences. It asserts that infants' earliest experiences of care are critically significant for their subsequent social and emotional well-being, because these provide a template for a child's developing 'internal working model' of self, others and the wider world. Morgan (2010) explored the relationship between the concepts of place attachment and interpersonal attachment. He suggests that place attachment develops due to the association between the positive feelings experienced during contact with the comforting caregiver, and the sense of mastery and adventure experienced during exploration. Attachment theory explains the role of interpersonal relationships in developing children's sense of safety and security, and the concept of place attachment reveals the crucial role of place in this process.

Place attachment is important for happiness and psychological well-being. For adults, a strong sense of place attachment is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, stronger social bonding, higher levels of trust in other people and lower levels of egocentricity (Lewicka, 2011). These are all attributes associated with good mental health.

Places of attachment are also restorative. In times of acute distress, many people simply want to go home, but visiting or even imagining other places of attachment can also help restore emotional equilibrium. Being able to take comfort from personally important places is one way children, young people and adults can build on facing the difficulties life will inevitably throw at them.

Given the known significance of place attachment for adults' well-being, surprisingly little attention has been paid to children's place attachments. A major study by Chawla concluded that 'our places of origin shape who we are whether we like it or not' (1992, p. 66). Spencer (2006) explored the role of place attachment in the development of a child's self-identity, linking a sense of belonging to a specific locality with a sense of self-worth. Spencer's work highlights the importance of the local area in primary geography.

When we investigate the school's locality, we demonstrate to pupils and parents that where they live is important, interesting and worthy of study. As each locality is unique, local studies reveal and celebrate a place's own specific history and special features. This may be especially valuable for pupils who live in stigmatised areas. Children living in places negatively portrayed in the media as deprived, dangerous or depressed may feel that if their area is 'rubbish', then so too (by implication) are they. Investigating the school's locality will hopefully counteract any negative messages and instead build pupils' sense of pride in their suburb, village or town (see also pages 24–5 of this issue).

How can we nurture children's place attachments?

If we want pupils to enjoy the benefits of secure place attachments, we need to pay attention to the school environment and the learning experiences we offer them. Pupils learn best in attractive, well-equipped schools where the emotional climate is positive, safe and respectful and where the learning activities are stimulating, interesting and purposeful. These conditions also lay the foundations for place attachment, because children develop attachments to places where they feel safe, secure, have fun and build happy memories. (To assess your classroom as a place for potential attachment, see web panel.)

The primary geography curriculum offers many opportunities for learning experiences (such as those outlined below) that lay the foundations for pupils to develop a sense of security and belonging – an essential element of place attachment.

Explore pupils' place attachments

Make time for activities that acknowledge and honour pupils' existing place attachments and investigate those of others (see Figure 2 for suggestions).

Encourage place-making

Small world play, in its myriad forms, enables pupils to fashion mini-worlds of their own creation and gives them time to 'experiment, create and reflect' (Bromley, 2004, p. 1) as they use miniature environments to act out scenarios. Young children enjoy making representations of places in favourite storybooks (see Tanner and Whittle, 2013) and creating models of known places using junk modelling approaches. Older primary pupils can use modelled environments to replicate dynamic earth processes, such as erosion and deposition in river valleys or on beaches, or to explore the potential impact of extreme weather conditions on their local area (see Witt and Clarke, 2016).

Nurture pupils' sense of awe and wonder

Remarkable experiences are everywhere: from observing the energy of wild weather and the annual spring miracle of bulb shoots pushing through frigid soil, to visits to ancient landmarks and watching glorious landscapes. Rich first-hand encounters with the wonders of our planet have a powerful emotional impact, so encourage pupils to marvel at the beauty and complexity of the natural world and at humankind's astonishing achievements. Such experiences not only enrich children's lives, but also nurture their sense of connection to the environment.

Improve your school grounds

School grounds projects can include creating a wildlife area, building a fitness trail, constructing a school garden, developing a sculpture trail, or growing willow structures. They allow numerous opportunities for geographical and cross-curricular learning and make the school estate a more stimulating environment for pupil learning and play. This, in turn, increases pupils' sense of stewardship.

Investigate local issues

Pupils can investigate local issues (such as litter, traffic problems, poor local amenities, inadequate bus services or vandalism) and take action. Direct action, such as undertaking a litter pick or organising a traffic reducing campaign directed at local residents, officials and politicians, builds pupils' sense of empowerment. It allows pupils to become engaged and responsible local citizens, strengthens their sense of belonging, and fosters their commitment and emotional connection to the local community.

Personal special places

Encourage pupils to talk about a place outside school that is special to them. Ask pupils to draw or bring in photos of these places. Use 'show and tell' sessions for individuals to talk about why these places are special to them. Provide materials for pupils to make scrapbooks about places that make them feel happy (Witt, 2010). Create a display, digital presentation or make a class book about 'Our Special Places'.

Mapping happiness

Display a map or aerial image of the school grounds. Ask pupils to nominate places where they feel happiest and explain why. Provide a printed map or image and invite pupils to use emoji stickers to locate their happy places. Discuss the distribution of these happy places. Explore the idea that different children may feel happy in different sorts of places (e.g. some like quiet places to talk with their friends, while others like open spaces for active play). To take this idea further, invite pupils to speculate on where adults feel happiest in school.

Loved local landmarks

Use Digimap for schools (see web panel) to display a large-scale map of the local area showing individual buildings. Invite pupils to suggest which local landmarks (buildings, statues, green spaces, etc.) might be most loved by local people. Construct a questionnaire showing images of these landmarks and ask parents and carers to nominate their favourite. Publish the results in the school newsletter or website.



Figure 2: Fostering place attachments. Photo © Anna Grandfield.

Conclusion

Schools have an important role in promoting their pupils' emotional well-being. They promote not only pupils' learning and educational attainment, but also their personal, social and emotional development. They help children and young people establish their identity, develop interpersonal skills and become more resilient. Research increasingly suggests that strong place attachments are associated with good mental health, and schools are well placed to nurture the sense of belonging and security that underpins this.

Taking a wider perspective, developing strong emotional attachments to places is also important for the future of our planet and humankind. Children who feel a sense of belonging to place – whether their local area, nation or the planet – will be better-prepared to become the responsible, active citizens needed to face the environmental, social and economic challenges of the twenty-first century.

References

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WEB RESOURCES

Classroom assessment activity:
www.geography.org.uk/pg
Digimap for schools:
<https://digimapforschools.edina.ac.uk/dfs/schools>

Julia Tanner is an Educational Consultant, editor of *The Everyday Guide to Primary Geography* series, a *Primary Geography Champion* and a member of the GA's Early Years and Primary Phase Committee.