

# Locating the Educator in Outdoor Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

We tell the story of an experience Kate Dawson, her students, and three eagles had at an outdoor preschool. The experience profoundly affected Kate, and prompted us to ask the following questions: What made this experience feel so magical, and what caused it to happen? Why are these *magical moments* valuable, and how might they impact our pedagogical practices? We posit that magical moments in outdoor early childhood education depend upon relational and *pathic* knowledge, and understanding of place, rather than intellectual or cognitive knowledge *about* place. We suggest conditions and practices educators may employ to foster magical moments, including slow ecopedagogy and embodied, sensory, and spiritual attunement to place. We consider our role as educators in the educator-students-place system, particularly when acknowledging that place is agentic, and acts as learner, knower and teacher. To understand place pedagogically, we must think of ourselves as learners and as the objects of learning, as much as thinking of ourselves as *knowers*. This requires a pedagogy of embodied responsiveness and a surrender to place as teacher. Far from simplifying the work of the educator, living within a relationship of educator-students-place complexifies the practice of teaching.

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*To hear is to witness, to witness is to become entangled. (Rose, 2004, p. 213)*

This article is based upon an experience Kate Dawson had with her students at an outdoor preschool program. Both Kate Dawson and Elizabeth Beattie have worked with young children in outdoor educational settings for many years, and both have a deep interest in understanding the practice and theory of outdoor early childhood education in both scholarly and personally meaningful ways. In this article, we interrogate a *magical moment* (Barnes, 2000; Cranton, 2002; Moss, 2014; Weimer, 2014) that occurred when Kate and her students were in an outdoor place they had come to know very well. We wonder about the qualities and conditions of these educational magical moments,

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and how and why educators might foster them in their practice. As so many magical moments seem to occur outdoors, we then focus on the importance of understanding place as an agentic teacher in outdoor early childhood education. We discuss ways in which we, as educators, can respond to, and be with, place in pedagogical terms. These questions are neither simple nor easy; we offer here a starting point for further discussion, rather than a provision of conclusive answers.

### **Kate's Story**

It was a warm, sunny day with a bright blue sky, and I was sitting with half a dozen preschoolers at 'Land of Sand', named by the children for the small sand and grass patch we had been visiting regularly. To the north, the Fraser River lapped at the dyke just the other side of the road; behind us was 'the Cottage', our school building; directly ahead was 'Eagle Tree Tunnel', two lines of tall firs that edge a pathway into the public park. The children were dragging sticks, climbing an apple tree, and walking through the scrubby grass while avoiding coyote scat and blackberry brambles. We had some measuring tapes, some clipboards and pencils, bits of string — nothing much. I was feeling at ease in this place with these particular young children. We were joined on this day by a visitor, a teacher candidate from the local university: Although 'Jenny' (a pseudonym) was friendly and engaging, and clearly keen to be with us in the park rather than indoors in a classroom, I began to feel self-conscious. I caught myself preaching to Jenny of the importance of allowing children to play for long periods of time, without the interference of a teacher; I sought to excuse my apparent indolence, explaining that I was, in fact, on high alert, keenly aware of the children's movements and conversations. I even began to second-guess my decision to return to this place, wondering if we had 'perhaps revisited this place once too often, and if, tomorrow, I should take them elsewhere?' I was concerned that I was not presenting a very professional example of being a teacher. I worried that I did not look like I was teaching.

I was also waiting rather anxiously for something to happen. It always does when we are outside. But time was running out, since we would soon need to head back to the school building for lunch and dismissal. Then 'Helen' (a pseudonym) shouted excitedly, 'Kate, Kate, the eagles!' And all of us looked up to see three eagles silently soaring above us.

It was no surprise to me that Helen was the first person to notice the eagles. She often did. Once, while we were in the city's centre on a field trip, she spotted a single eagle, coasting so high above us on the thermals that it was hardly visible. It was also no surprise that there were eagles with us in this place — we were beside Eagle Tree Tunnel after all! As I smiled in gratitude for the opportunity to share this sight with the children, I also felt relieved: relief that *something* had indeed happened to validate and justify my way of teaching in Jenny's presence. I was also thrilled for Helen that she had once again connected with the eagles. Without even thinking, I responded to her, 'Call to them, Helen! Call to them! Let them know you are here!' Helen, who had heard the eagles singing and calling from their perch in the trees on many mornings, called to them in a clear, strong voice that sounded very 'eagle-ish'. Then, beyond all our expectations, and in mid-flight, the eagles called back! Helen's expression was one of pure joy! She sang out to them again and again, and the eagles continued to sing in response before finally flying away over the river. All the children paused in their play; the teacher candidate looked awestruck, and I laughed out loud at this delightful occurrence.

In the following months I reflected frequently upon our collective experience. Why did it stay with me so deeply? In previous weeks we had studied eagles in many ways:

we observed the eagles sitting high in Eagle Tree Tunnel while beginning our morning circle; we read books about eagles; we examined and drew a mounted eagle specimen; we used binoculars to track the eagles over the river; we measured the height of the eagle trees; and we ‘flew’ like eagles through the park. What was different about this day with the eagles as compared to our previous experiences? I wanted to understand what had happened in this instance, why it had happened, and what I could learn from it.

### Emerging Questions

Kate’s experience with the eagles, and the reflections it inspired for both of us, prompted us to write this article. We were guided by the following questions: What made this experience feel so magical, and what caused it to happen? Why are these *magical moments* valuable, and how might they impact our pedagogical practices?

We are writing this paper in an effort to use these questions as prompts that propel us forward, threading our thoughts and feelings together with some of the research literature that is available. This is a reflective exercise for us to think about our own teaching, as well as an invitation for others to engage in this conversation.

### Experiencing Magical Moments

As educators, many of us have had experiences similar to Kate’s: ‘a-ha’ moments of deep connection and clarity between educators, students, and curriculum (Weimer, 2014). As outdoor educators, we suggest that a connection with place also contributes to such moments of magical transformation, clarity, and understanding. *Magical moments* are fleeting, unplanned, and therefore surprising (Cranton, 2002; Weimer, 2014). Surprise calls our attention to a moment or experience in an emotional rather than a logical way, so we feel goosebumps or struggle to find words that adequately describe the moment (Leopold, 1966).

While magical moments may defy description, certain conditions can support their likelihood of occurring. An awareness of what is habitual, typical, or routine allows for recognition of a changing condition. For example, in Kate’s story, Kate and the children recognised the call of the eagles from their previous experiences of hearing the eagles singing, which they had often done while sitting in trees. One difference that made this particular experience unusual was that the eagles sang while they were flying. The children, and Helen in particular, recognised the flying birds specifically as eagles, so they were aware of this difference in the eagles’ behaviour.

Another condition that may support magical moments is that of trust and its partner, vulnerability (Moss, 2014). Kate expressed her confidence that ‘something always happens outside’ even as she felt vulnerable to the possibility of the teacher candidate’s judgment for not acting sufficiently ‘teacher-ish’. As well, Kate stated she felt relaxed and at ease, but concurrently hyper-aware and attuned to the children and their surroundings, thus she was mindful of the current situation, while staying open to unexpected possibilities. When the educator surrenders some control of time, space, movement, or language, she makes room for others — students, place, eagles — and trusts that the learning experience will be enriched by the energy, actions, words, and ideas contributed by those others (Moss, 2014).

The teaching practices described above comprise a *pathic* knowledge, knowledge that is not cognitive but that resides in bodies, in the senses, and in our relations with all of the beings with whom we interact (van Manen, 2007). Particularly, pathic knowledge is embodied and influences our actions and relations to places and situations (van Manen, 2007).

*The pathic refers to the general mood, sensibility, sensuality, and felt sense of being in the world.... The pathically tuned body recognizes itself in its responsiveness to the things of its world and to the others who share our world or break into our world. The pathic sense perceives the world in a feeling or emotive modality of knowing and being. (van Manen, 2007, pp. 20–21)*

In Kate's story, there is evidence of a shift in both her own and in the student's, Helen's, pathic knowledge. On previous visits, whenever the children noticed the eagles, Kate suggested that the children 'Say Hi!' to the eagles, and the children would call out, 'Hi! Hi eagles!' However, Kate's and Helen's own experiences of knowing and being with the eagles caused their actions to alter from taking a human-centred perspective: Kate switched verbs, from 'say' to 'call', and Helen switched from using words to singing to the eagles in an imitation of their language. Both Kate's and Helen's actions indicate a stronger, more familiar relationship with the eagles. Kate and Helen embody a relationship with the eagles that feels different through the experience of singing with them.

Relationality is central to the notion of pathic knowledge (van Manen, 2007). When considering education with young children outdoors, the primary system of relations used is that of students-educator-place: the students are situated within their surroundings — meaning the learning environment — which is composed of both the place and the effects of the educator (Davis & Sumara, 1997). These relations are not static, however. Neither the place nor the educator is constant, nor do they exert a constant effect on the students. Thus, the students' surroundings are constantly changing, causing the students to also constantly change within their surroundings. Simultaneously, the students are causing changes to the surroundings (Davis & Sumara, 1997). The educator is also a learner and is equally subject to the effects of changes in the surroundings, both the changing place and the changing students (Davis & Sumara, 1997). Finally, the place is changing the students and educator, and being changed by them in turn (Davis & Sumara, 1997). There are many ways to consider and define *place* (Greenwood, 2013; Raill Jayanandhan, 2009), and an analysis of those ways is beyond the scope of this article. We use the term *place*, referencing Duhn (2012), who conceives of place as an *assemblage*, that 'recognizes human and more-than-human ecologies and interaction as a field of forces or a territory with porous boundaries and multiple presences' (p. 102). This means that place itself is neither static nor singular. Drawing from Kate's story, place may include eagles, trees, the wind, grass, sticks, humans, children's laughter, insects, and scat, to suggest but a few. Such elements of a place may change briskly or over a long period of time, but it is the interactions between these elements that are crucial to making the place particular. As educators and as learners, we can become attuned to the elements of a place in the same way that we become attuned to the emotions and energies of our students. As well, we can become attuned to the intangible energies of the elements in their relations to one another, including also our own presence and interactions, thereby developing a pathic sense of a place.

We should recognise that educators, students, and place are all agentic components of the system, all causing change and being changed simultaneously. In Kate's story, the place chose to offer Kate and the students an opportunity to sing with the eagles; Helen, the student, independently focused her attention on the eagles; Kate, the educator, exercised her agency when she waited for the place to offer this learning moment and then embraced it when it appeared. Each of these actors — place, student, and educator — affected the others and was affected by them throughout Helen and the eagles' singing together. Kate prompted Helen to start the singing, and was then astonished and profoundly moved by the experience. Helen encouraged the eagles to communicate

with her, and her pathic knowledge and sense of place was increased as a result. The place initiated the interaction by opening itself to the humans, and then was changed as an assemblage, or a system, as a result of the changed relationships within it. The interactions between the components, or nodes, of a system, are more important than these components themselves (Meadows, 2008). That is to say, the students, educator, and place are less important than the interactions between them. These interactions, and the resulting changes, are the relations that are fundamental to pathic knowledge; they are the teaching and learning that is the heart of education. When the interactions between educators, students, and place ‘resonate in the body, in our relations with others, in the things of our world, and in our very actions’ (van Manen, 2007, p. 22), we experience those spine-tingling, awe-inspiring, and profound moments that are the delightful magic of teaching.

### Fostering Magical Moments

Magical moments cannot be forced, but they can be nurtured. As early childhood educators working outdoors, we can foster magical moments such as Kate’s and her students’ experience with the eagles by endeavouring to increase our students’ and our own knowledge gained from pathic experiences.

In traditional Euro-American schooling and education, knowledge is understood to be primarily cognitive (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, Donovan, & Pelligrino, 2000; Stevenson, 2007). However, cognitive and reasoning processes are not the primary ways that young children learn: young children gain knowledge of their surroundings through forming and testing physical, emotional and social relationships (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Further, cognitive and reasoning forms of knowledge are insufficient for students and educators to fully know and experience a relationship with an outdoor place (Derby, Blenkinsop, Telford, Piersol, & Caulkins, 2013; Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016). By encouraging young children to gain pathic knowledge, we are helping them to learn in ways that are more suited to them both developmentally as young learners and as learners in an outdoor setting.

To encourage our students to be pathic learners, educators should have an awareness of, and continue to deepen, their own pathic skills. This can be difficult, as teaching and learning pathic knowledge is not emphasised in traditional Euro-American teacher education programs (Bransford et al., 2000). If, however, we truly position our educator selves as just one part of the educator-students-place system, we will begin to develop pedagogical and curricular practices that allow complex relationships to flourish, in order for our own, and our students’, pathic knowledge to grow. Over several weeks prior to the magical moment with eagles, Kate employed a number of age-appropriate traditional lessons to introduce her students to the subject of eagles, such as science-, drama-, literacy- and mathematics-based activities. These activities represent a traditional, cognitive approach to teaching and learning, and had a limited effect on developing relationships between Kate, her students, and these particular eagles in this particular place. However, as Kate and the students repeatedly visited Land of Sand and the adjacent Eagle Tree Tunnel, spending comfortable and exploratory time in that place, they interacted with all the elements of the place and became part of the place in some way. Educator and children together became familiar with the elements and the rhythms of the place — its sights, smells, and sounds — so much so that they were able to recognise when something different occurred — the eagles flying and singing in response simultaneously. They learned about their local place through their senses and through the relationships they had formed with the place and with one another in that place, thereby gaining pathic knowledge of the place.

## Taking Time

In early childhood education, teaching practices are often dominated by the clock (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998). When a schedule of activities is set according to the time of day, educators and children may feel rushed, and deep, meaningful learning opportunities are curtailed (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998). Removing this rigid, clock-based schedule from early childhood education offers several benefits. For instance, when young children have the chance to take as much time as they wish, their explorations become more involved and creative (Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998). When early childhood education programs provide young children with some freedom to choose how long they spend at various activities, the children's agency in their own learning is acknowledged (Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998). This is an important point for early childhood educators interacting within the educator-students-place system. In Kate's story, there is tension as she feels 'time running out,' even as she allows the students more time to explore and engage in their own learning in Land of Sand. Kate's students were learning on their own as they climbed an apple tree, improving their physical coordination and risk-management abilities, and avoiding coyote scat and blackberry brambles as they moved through the grass, thus increasing their observation and categorisation skills.

Aligned with ideas of a curriculum that is not driven primarily by the clock, Payne and Wattchow (2009) promote a slow ecopedagogy that emphasises the embodied experience of spending time in one place. Slow ecopedagogy suggests returning to the same place repeatedly in order to create prolonged experiences of, and connections with, place (Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Again, in Kate's story, she expresses a tension, wondering if they have spent *too much* time in this same place, as though novelty and a speedy 'on to the next task' approach is an indicator of quality teaching. We encourage a practice of slow ecopedagogy that begins with the educator's own resistance to a clock-based practice in order to facilitate both her own and her students' relational connection to place.

Both E. Elliot (personal communication, May, 2014) and Pelo (2013) note that repeatedly returning to the same place with young children often supports the development of rituals. Elliot describes a ritual the students at a nature kindergarten have developed: as they walk through the forest to one of their play spots, they all circle around a specific, large tree three times. Pelo (2013) writes of rituals that occur during walks with a young child: picking an apple from a neighbour's apple tree, or shaking the dew off of a bush at the corner of the street. Young children's outdoor rituals:

*cultivate the practice of deliberately honoring [sic] beauty and delight and discovery, astonishment and reverence. Ritual hones our attention and lively awareness, and calls forward who we want to be and how we want to live in a place. Ritual celebrates the places that matter to us, and the creatures who reside there, and the experiences that we have there. (Pelo, 2013, p. 175)*

Practising slow ecopedagogy, allowing young children's outdoor rituals to emerge, is another way that educators can foster pathic knowledge and therefore contribute to the experience of magical moments. The young children's outdoor ritual increases the likelihood of an experience becoming a magical moment because the children and the educators have come into a relationship with place and know it deeply — they have shifted from *learning about* a place, to *being with* a place. In Kate's story, despite the pressures of the clock, the children continued to spend 'unhurried time' (Wien & Kirby-Smith, 1998, p. 8) outdoors, increasing their pathic knowledge, allowing time and place

for their ritual of ‘saying “Hi” to eagles to manifest instead as a magical moment of singing *with* eagles.

### Attending to Place

In the educator-students-place system, all three components are agentic. As we spend time in outdoor places, we can use our agency to open ourselves to the actions of place, and assist our students to do the same. As Kate explains, while outside with her students, she was on ‘high alert’, actively waiting for what would surely unfold. This is how a place is agentic, by sharing its unfolding happenings with us. Land of Sand offered Kate and the children the feeling of the warm sun on their faces, the sounds of the river, a tree to climb, sticks to carry, and eagles to sing with. Kate and her students were ‘together in the bodily presence of this place. Listening, watching, waiting for knowing to be formed through happenstance arrivals and chance noticings’ (Jardine, 1998, p. 94).

Jardine (1998) explains that the ways of knowing a place are relational, and that they are sensory: there is bodily knowledge when he is bitten by a mosquito, and auditory understanding gained from the articulations of the cicadas. Kimmerer (2013) writes about being in place and relating with multiple senses:

*I come here to listen, to nestle in the curve of the roots in a soft hollow of pine needles, to lean my bones against the column of white pine, to turn off the voice in my head until I can hear the voices outside it: the shhh of wind in needles, water trickling over rock, nuthatch tapping, chipmunks digging, beechnut falling, mosquito in my ear, and something more — something that is not me, for which we have no language, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone. After the drumbeat of my mother’s heart, this was my first language. (p. 48)*

For Jardine (1998) and Kimmerer (2013), place knowledge is spiritual, emotional, and embodied — it is pathic.

### The Pedagogical Value of Magical Moments: Understanding Place Pedagogically

In Kate’s story, she recognises the importance of returning to place, but also wonders if she has now taken her group to this same place too often? How can an educator know? We believe that attending to place, being with it, and being with our students in place is an important first step toward answering this question. As educators, when we consider our understanding of a place in pedagogical terms, we can learn from place as teacher. Understanding place pedagogically is a difficult task, and we are still struggling with how to do this and what exactly this might mean. This section of the article develops our ideas around the notion of place as a knower, a learner, and a teacher. We believe being with place in these ways supports the occurrence of magical moments.

Just as educators and students form relationships with place and know it pathically, place forms relationships with us and knows us in various ways. By acknowledging that place has agency as a member of the educator-students-place system, we acknowledge that place has this ability to act, to affect change, to participate in magical moments — and also, to teach, to learn, and to know. When singing with the eagles, Helen learns about them and forms a deeper relationship with that place: What are the eagles learning about Helen? How is the place’s relationship with Helen, Kate, and the rest of the students changed, and how does this change affect what can be taught and learned by the place in the future? ‘In a knowledge of ways [of place], I do not simply know. I am also known’ (Jardine, 1998, p. 96). As educators, when we make pedagogical sense of how

place knows us and our students, we locate our work within the educator-students-place system.

Traditional, Euro-American, formal education obscures our relation to place, especially to land (Greenwood, 2013) and to the beings that inhabit it (Lloro-Bidart, 2016). However, in the last few decades, a movement towards place-based (Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004) or place-conscious education (Greenwood, 2013) has formed. Place-based education connects students to their local surroundings and communities; it makes learning more meaningful, relevant, and engaging; and it allows students to create, rather than simply consume, knowledge (Greenwood, 2013; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004). However, traditional place-based education tends to prioritise human endeavours and human agents: place itself, and its more-than-human aspects, are not considered as informers or co-builders of curriculum. Rather, place is used instrumentally as an object to further the goals of traditional Euro-American schooling, such as having students succeed academically, develop problem-solving skills, and meet curriculum standards (Greenwood, 2013; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004). Traditional place-based education does not ask educators and students to enter into the complex interactions of the educator-students-place system. Pedagogically speaking, traditional place-based education does not offer educators a meaningful way to think about their interactions with place as a dynamic relationship, since place is not considered agentic in this type of teaching and learning. 'Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum' (Sobel, 2004). In this quotation, we see that the environment, meaning place, is to be *used* to further the teaching of a curriculum that already exists. There is no suggestion that the environment, the local place, should help to shape or even teach the curriculum. Rather, place is simply objectified, there to be used as humans desire.

Not every educator who practises place-based education is using this form of traditional place-based education. The term *place-based education* may cover multiple forms of place-related pedagogy, included traditional place-based education (Sobel, 2004), place-responsive education (Spillman, 2017), land-based education (Lowan-Trudeau, 2013), and place-conscious education (Greenwood, 2013), to name only a few. We are critiquing traditional place-based education specifically.

Place-conscious education (Greenwood, 2013) offers a greater awareness of the role of place as a pedagogical agent: 'as centers of experience, places teach us and shape our identities and relationships. Reciprocally, people shape places' (p. 93). Place-conscious education recognises the benefits of place-based education but goes beyond this pedagogical method of simply using place as a teaching tool (Greenwood, 2013). Place-conscious education asks us to reflect critically upon ourselves in place: to consider how cultures and politics have created and informed our notions and experiences of different places, and what we can learn *from*, rather than just *about*, place (Greenwood, 2013). In these ways, place-conscious education offers us a philosophical orientation, rather than a specific pedagogical methodology, with which we can critique traditional, Euro-American, instrumental schooling (Greenwood, 2013). The goal of place-conscious education is developing new relationships between humans and place that require humans to live well socially, and within ecological limits (Greenwood, 2013). Pedagogically speaking, place is the site and impetus for all education in place-conscious education. However, the work of teaching and learning remains the sole domain of humans. It seems to be taken for granted that places will want to have relationships with humans on human terms and will let us do our teaching and learning in them. Although place-conscious education offers promising ways of thinking about place pedagogically, we are concerned that it does not consider place as an active



participant in the dynamic educator-students-place system of teaching and learning that we believe supports developing educators' and young children's pathic knowledge in the outdoors.

Using this notion of the educator-students-place system as a lens, we can examine examples of early childhood outdoor learning and consider how they take the multiple interrelationships of the system into account. Elliot (in Elliot, Eycke, Chan, & Müller, 2014) describes the effect of outdoor learning in a nature kindergarten on the educators: by observing the children's interactions with the place and one another, the educators learned to relate their teaching to the children's interests and to help the children extend their learning through guided inquiry. The educators became co-learners and shared their learning with the children in order to help the children learn (Elliot et al., 2014). In this case, the educators appear to adopt a pedagogical approach to place that is mediated by the children's relationships with place, rather than developing their own direct connections to place. Thus, the educators' outdoor pedagogy focuses on the children's experiences, with the educators acting as facilitators for the children's learning (Elliot et al., 2014). Similarly, place appears to be used to facilitate the children's learning, even as the children form relationships to place, rather than place becoming an agentic teacher (Elliot et al., 2014). We believe this educational experience could be strengthened by educators developing their own relationships with the place. This could lead to an acknowledgment of place as a teacher and a learner, affecting and affected by students and educators; and an understanding of how educators might act to respect and acknowledge this relationship pedagogically.

Raill Jayanandhan (2009) offers an alternative perspective on learning and place: she proposes the benefits of educational structures that 'foster an understanding of how to learn about place' (pp. 109–110). Raill Jayanandhan's notion is interesting because she envisions students mentoring other students, rather than educators teaching the students, with the implication that student mentors will learn to improve their own learning through the act of teaching other students about learning in their specific places. In this way, Raill Jayanandhan's pedagogical understanding of place is highly attuned to the students' relationships with place. On the other hand, Raill Jayanandhan's vision of students 'learning how to learn how to be in a place' (p. 109) is intentionally accomplished without specifically trained educators, meaning that it is occurring apart from the educator-students-place system. Again, we believe that including place as a teacher would enrich this teaching and learning experience.

Jardine (1998) identifies an important component of education within place as 'learning about how to carry oneself in such a way that the ways of this place might show themselves' (p. 95). This suggestion identifies that place has agency and is capable of making itself visible, if humans are receptive to it. Jardine continues: 'education, perhaps, involves the invitation of children into such living ways' (p. 95), an idea that hints at the role educators are to play when working with young children outdoors. As we have discussed earlier, Jardine describes these ways of being in place as sensory, relational, and pathic. We suggest that Jardine begins to elucidate the educator's role in the educator-students-place system as he considers a reciprocal relationship between educators and place, one in which educators and place know each other through their mutual exchange of teaching and learning. What about the students' role? Students, too, act as forces for change through their teaching, learning, and knowing within the educator-students-place system, although Jardine does not articulate how this might occur.

Pelo (2013) posits that students can be active learners and teachers. She describes learning how to learn in place by observing how Dylan, a young child with whom she spends her days as a caregiver, forms her relationships with place (Pelo, 2013).

Pelo is guided by Dylan's ability to immerse herself bodily in their outdoor experiences: upon encountering a salamander, Pelo writes, 'after a while, I stop waiting and start watching, like Dylan is doing' (p. 88). Pelo is further inspired by Dylan's full-body imitation of a mallard duck (2013). As in Elliot's description of the educators' learning (Elliot et al., 2014), Pelo's experiences of place are first mediated through a young child. Pelo, however, becomes more actively entangled in the educator-students-place system as she shifts from waiting for Dylan to viewing Dylan as the teacher, showing Pelo how to become more attuned to the salamander or duck. Pelo's fervent hope for Dylan is that she would 'learn the place where she lived, would take it into her bones and blood so that it would become bound into her identity' (p. 32), a process of embodiment that Pelo, as an educator, could hardly conceive of if she did not feel it herself. Less apparent is Pelo's position on the reciprocal process, in which place may absorb Dylan into itself and make Dylan part of the place where she lives.

As educators and as learners working with students who are also teachers, in places that act as teachers and learners, we are seeking a deeper pedagogical investigation of the complexities and interrelationships of the educator-students-place system. We believe honouring such a system warrants further critical and compassionate consideration.

*The communal nature of knowing goes beyond the relations of knowers; it includes a community of interaction between knowers and the known.... To know something is to have a living relationship with it — influencing and being influenced by the object known. (Palmer, 1993, p. xv)*

Complexifying the educator-students-place system, in order to better understand our role as educators and to better understand place in pedagogical terms, requires attending closely to the *community of interactions* of which Palmer (1993) writes. These are the emergent relationships between educators and students, educators and place, and place and students. We have already seen that these are reciprocal relationships in which each partner is changed by the others simultaneously. Palmer's (1993) description of these interactions as *living relationships* helps us to conceptualise them as active and constantly evolving. Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) attend to the relations between young children and aspects of place; in particular, small invertebrates. Much like Palmer (1993), Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw consider the emergent interactions between the two partners in the relationship: it is learning itself that emerges. Despite this, we find Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw's pedagogical understanding of place and the educator-students-place system somewhat limited. While Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw intend to develop and examine a pedagogy that 'challenges human-centric assumptions' (p. 508) and attend to the 'relations taking place between all the actors — human and more-than-human alike' (p. 508), they focus only upon young children and one other species of animal, using a pedagogical lens of science and ethics, thus eclipsing the role of educators and the relationships they form with place. While acknowledging the difficulty of avoiding such human-centred ways of knowing, Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw grant agency to animals in the same way they grant agency to young children — with the caveat that as educators, as ethnographers and researchers who are objective observers, they need not take this agency into consideration in their own relationships with either the young children or the animals. By this we mean that Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw consider the children, the animals, their emergent learning, and by extension, the place it occurs in, as objects of study, while minimising their own roles as educators and researchers and thereby distancing themselves from participation in the educator-students-place system.

In early childhood education, there is a recent movement toward outdoor learning that follows the Montessori approach and positions nature or place as the teacher (Dennis, Wells, & Bishop, 2014; Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; MacQuarrie, Nugent, & Warden, 2015; Nazir & Pedretti, 2015). What would that mean for us as educators, not in terms of curricular methods, but for a pedagogical philosophy, to let place be the teacher? Accepting place as fully agentic, as learning from and with educators and students, as a knower and also as a teacher, we, the educators and students, must also be the learners and also the known. This is something of a twofold role reversal: first, for us as humans, when humans become the objects, the observed, and the judged; second, for us as educators, to become seekers, rather than holders, of knowledge. We believe this to be a necessary component of a pedagogical understanding of place: seeing place and all its elements, including humans, as interconnected, rather than thinking of educators and students, and humans in general, as an independent, separate, or superior category of beings. Instead of creating a dichotomy between humans and place, we would do well to see place as all-embracing, and ourselves as only one of its many active components. This is not to suggest that educators no longer have agency, for that would cause the educator-students-place system to collapse. Rather, it situates the system within place, as a function of place, upon which the system depends completely. Acknowledging this fundamental lesson of place honours our students and ourselves by opening the door to all that place can teach.

LLoro-Bidart (2016) proposes ‘a nascent feminist posthumanist political ecology of education’ (p. 2), offering a starting point for engaging in a pedagogical framework that honours an understanding of place as agentic and necessary to educational endeavours. This pedagogy ‘includes attunement to (1) the real-lived experiences of animals and humans, including human/animal agency, ... and the role of the material environment; (2) embodied, emotional, and affective ways of knowing that allow humans to see non-humans as persons’ (Lloro-Bidart, pp. 2–3). We would extend the attunement beyond animals to include everything that makes up a place, living and non-living, and to the place itself, so that even elements of ‘the material environment’ (LLoro-Bidart, p. 2) can be seen ‘as persons’ (LLoro-Bidart, p. 3) and thus as teachers. We also suggest that we go beyond ‘attunement’ (LLoro-Bidart, p. 2), so that our pedagogy becomes almost a practice of *surrender* to place and its teachings. By surrendering to place, not only can we know the place and its elements as teachers, they can begin to know us as beings to be embraced, as parts of place that belong to it. It is this surrender — the surrender of control in favour of giving our time and attention to all of our senses (Butala, 2010) — that fosters pathic knowledge and magical moments.

Such a surrender is not passive. While making time for sensory experiences with place, we continue to be in active, living relationships with our students and with place. Such a surrender is not easily undertaken. It takes effort to step aside as an educator, allowing students or place to become the teacher. To open oneself to another person or place requires a willingness to be vulnerable that can only emerge from a trusting relationship. We will have to work to establish this relationship with place. Rose (2004, 2007) speaks of practising *embodied responsiveness* when we are being with place, meaning the ways that we become intimately entangled and involved with place. This entanglement is both pathic and cognitive, as it is embodied and reflexive. We believe Rose’s embodied responsiveness is a good model for the kind of pedagogical surrender to place that we are suggesting. It requires full-bodied participation and active reflection upon our actions, while allowing us and our students to learn from place and be with place in an effort to avoid dominating place. We think a pedagogy of embodied responsiveness to place and to our students honours the educator-students-place system; allows living, dynamic relationships to grow; and, ultimately, fosters

those spine-tingling magical moments, such as Kate had with her students and the eagles.

### The Importance of Place as Teacher

Why do we believe it is important that educators practise embodied responsiveness and honour the educator-students-place system? Why do we believe that early childhood education should take place outdoors and that it should specifically include being with place? For us, outdoor early childhood education is not a reaction to the current environmental crisis, as it is perhaps for Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015), although we do not dispute the scientific evidence that indicates that such a crisis is occurring.

We believe outdoor education is crucial for young children because it encourages pedagogical practices that engage with students as people in their entirety, as holistic beings. Education that happens in and with place involves cognitive, emotional, sensual, physical, and spiritual dimensions. By spiritual, we mean an intangible sense of connectedness, wellbeing, and belonging.

*Attention to spirituality in the curriculum may involve risk-taking, an awareness of the world and a willingness to be changed. In this sense, practices that remain open and welcoming to difference, whether of people, culture, ideas or beliefs become essential in terms of sharing spiritual understandings and becoming transformative. (Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007, p. 351)*

Outdoor teaching and learning allows place, including the more-than-human such as the eagles, to be easily welcomed as transformative agents in our learning, and encourages magical moments (Barnes, 2000; Cranton, 2002; Moss, 2014; Weimer, 2014). Learning from, and being with, place enriches both educators and their students — fostering deeper connections to place and community, and a greater sense of personal wellbeing.

### Moving Forward

Even as we draw these tentative conclusions, as we try to surrender to place as teacher through a pedagogy of embodied responsiveness and pathic knowledge, we are also looking ahead. What more can we do with these emerging understandings to move them beyond our own teaching practices?

We are interested in collaborating with other educators to develop ways of teaching and being with place in an educator-students-place system. The full-bodied participation, whole-heartedness and spiritual wellness that are fundamental to learning with place are not generally emphasised in preservice teacher education (Inwood & Jagger, 2014; Malandrakis, 2017; Ormond et al., 2014; Tomas, Girgenti, & Jackson, 2015). Perhaps the disconnection from the clock and the slow ecopedagogy that we believe foster pathic knowledge and magical moments cannot be taught in a classroom? Perhaps preservice teacher education can only assist educators to develop these skills by giving them the opportunity to spend time with place first-hand?

We believe that one of our primary roles as educators who try to work with place, participating fully in the educator-students-place system, is to tell the stories of these experiences and magical moments. In fact, this may be what place requires of us in return for its teachings.

*A knowledge of the ways of red-winged blackbirds is not found nestled in the detailed and careful descriptions of birding guides. Rather, such knowledge lives in the living, ongoing work of coming to a place, learning its ways and living with the unforeseeable consequence that you inevitably become someone in such efforts, someone full of tales to tell, tales of intimacy, full of proper names,*

*particular ventures, bodily memories that are entangled in and indebted to the very flesh of the Earth they want to tell. (Jardine, 2008, p. 95)*

By telling these tales, we deepen our connections and entanglements with place. We honour what we have learned and what is still unknown, and we make a commitment to teaching our students with and in place. We tell these stories with our words, our hearts, and our actions.

## Conclusion

In this article, we built upon Kate's and her students' experience with the eagles to consider the following questions: What made this experience feel so magical, and what caused it to happen? Why are these magical moments valuable, and how might they impact our pedagogical practices?

We have not arrived at any final conclusions — nor did we mean to. This work is just beginning. By telling the story of Kate's experience, we have endeavoured to honour the role of place as teacher in the educator-students-place system and to share with other educators the possibilities of those magical moments that so often occur when we stop merely learning from place and start being with place. From Kate's story, we learned that she fostered the creation of the magical moment by making time for the relationship between her students and the place to grow. We believe this relationship consists of bodily, sensory, emotional knowledge — pathic knowledge. A living relationship forms, leading to a sense of belonging and holistic wellbeing in place. Kate and her students learned from place as they explored, observed, climbed, and played. Their place, Land of Sand, taught them how to navigate around brambles and where to find apples, and also coyote scat. Helen developed a deep pathic connection with the eagles, and with Kate's help, the eagles taught Helen to sing with them. This experience culminated in a sense of joy, community-in-place and wellbeing for Kate, the visiting student teacher, and for this small group of young children.

We suggest that when educators and students actively surrender to place, their learning experiences consist of embodied responses guided by pathic knowledge. This pedagogy is a departure from traditional educational methods of relating to place, for it requires recognising all of the elements that combine to create place as agentic persons (LLoro-Bidart, 2016), and as teachers, rather than limiting the roles of teacher and learner to humans alone. We offer suggestions to facilitate such a pedagogical surrender: disconnect from rigid scheduling; take time to practise slow ecopedagogy; and pay full attention with all of your faculties — sensory, bodily, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual. In addition to assisting students to develop their relationships with place, attend also to your own relationship with place. When educators fully participate in the educator-students-place system, moments of magic become possible.

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*Keywords:* early childhood education, place, pathic knowledge, slow ecopedagogy, preservice teacher education, outdoor teaching and learning

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**Kate Dawson** spent her childhood catching frogs, digging for clay, and building snow forts in the Saskatchewan prairies. Her appreciation for First Nations' culture was nurtured by the hoop dancing, drumming, and beadwork of the Cree peoples. Social history and geography are among her passions. Kate holds Bachelors of Arts and Education from the University of British Columbia. She works as an Early Childhood Educator at Terra Nova Nature School, Richmond, British Columbia. Inspired by Reggio Emilia, Kate is keenly interested in educational practices that build community through relationships. Kate would like to complete a Masters degree, a marathon, learn to speak Italian, and make more art.

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