

The Place of Experience and the Experience of Place: Intersections Between Sustainability Education and Outdoor Learning

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Abstract

As social, economic and environmental issues have become more prominent in the 21st century, there has been increased critical scrutiny into the ways that outdoor learning interacts with sustainability issues and concepts. As a result, a number of discourses have emerged which interrogate human/nature relationships in traditional outdoor education and propose greater engagement with place-responsive or sustainable approaches. Drawing on research with teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, this article explores possible intersections between sustainability education outdoor learning. Accordingly, this article focuses on two key ideas: First, the nexus of experience and place offers significant promise for educational endeavours that seek to educate for a sustainable future. Second, traditional conceptions of wilderness as a pedagogical site, can be problematic for outdoor education programs which seek to claim the ground of sustainability. While there is much that can be gained from journeys in remote pristine environments, not all of these experiences necessarily lead to the development of attitudes, understandings, skills, and motivation to live more sustainably. Furthermore, approaches to outdoor learning that seek to develop connection to and care for remote, pristine places, at the same time ignoring more local or impacted places, could present a dichotomous view of 'nature' to students, thereby disrupting efforts to educate for sustainability.

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) called for 'a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future' (as cited in Eames, Barker, Wilson-Hill, & Law, 2010, p. 1). The implications of such a call have yet to be realised across many fields within education, particularly outdoor education. In the last decade, slow progress has been made towards more critically and socio-ecologically informed notions of outdoor education, despite the work of numerous academics and practitioners calling for approaches informed by sustainability, human–nature relationships, and place-responsiveness. In Aotearoa New Zealand, and parts of Australia, much traditional or mainstream outdoor education is underpinned by notions of adventure, risk, challenge, and personal development as central tenets, as argued by authors such as Payne and Wattchow (2008), Lugg (2004), and Boyes (2012). While outcomes based on these tenets

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may be admirable, I contend that they remain somewhat distant from the goal of educating for a sustainable future. Meanwhile, despite significant progress, environmental education/education for sustainability (Efs) in Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand schools, have been a low priority, or exist primarily on the periphery of school curriculum, as suggested by Tilbury, Coleman, and Garlick (2005), and Eames, Cowie, and Bolstad (2008). It is into this space that intersections between sustainability education and outdoor learning provide potential for realising new visions of education that work towards a sustainable future.

I use the terms 'sustainability education' and 'outdoor learning' deliberately here. Drawing from Sterling (2010), sustainability education is used in this article as a catch-all for environmental education (EE), education for sustainability (Efs), and education for sustainable development (ESD). Sustainability, in this context is articulated by Sterling (2010) as 'implying economic viability, ecological integrity and social cohesion but also necessitating an operating ecological or participatory worldview which recognises these qualities or system conditions as mutually interdependent ... sustainability is both a process and a broad direction' (p. 512). Consequently, sustainability education can be seen as a process and direction for developing attitudes, understandings, skills, and motivation to actively participate in bringing about more sustainable systems. Here I acknowledge the contestation and debates surrounding discourses of sustainability and sustainable development (e.g., see Jacobs, 1999; Neumayer, 2003; Williams & Millington, 2004), alongside environmental education and Efs/ESD (e.g., see Jickling & Wals, 2008; Kopnina, 2012; Reid & Scott, 2006; Sterling, 2010). Entering substantially into these debates, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, this article seeks to contribute to discourses of sustainability education through further exploring the nexus of place and experience as a pedagogical site. Likewise, drawing on Scottish perspectives, (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2007) the term 'outdoor learning' is used to depict a broader conception of outdoor education. This is a deliberate attempt to distance this article from narrow yet discursively powerful notions of outdoor education that focus on adventure pursuit activities. Here the term 'outdoor learning' does not necessarily exclude notions of adventure, but can be seen through an interdisciplinary lens that may be more commensurate with sustainability education goals and pedagogies.

Drawing from recent doctoral research (Hill, 2011), this article explores possible next steps for sustainability education and outdoor learning through considering intersections between the two. This paper focuses on two key ideas: First, I argue the nexus of 'experience' and 'place' offers significant promise for educational endeavours that seek to educate for a sustainable future. Second, I explore how traditional conceptions of 'wilderness' as a pedagogical site might be problematic for outdoor education programs that seek to claim the ground of sustainability. Over the past 2 decades there have been a number of calls from outdoor education academics in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand to embrace critical (P. Martin, 1999; Payne, 2002), ecological (P. Martin, 2008b), sustainability focused (Irwin, 2010; Lugg, 2007), and place-responsive (Stewart, 2004; Wattchow & Brown, 2011) approaches into the outdoor learning theory and practice. This interest in the potential for ecological and sustainability focused learning through outdoor experiences extends internationally; for example, the United Kingdom (Higgins, 2009; Nicol, 2003), North America (Mullins, 2011; O'Connell, Potter, Curthoys, Dymont, & Cuthbertson, 2005), and Scandinavia (Andkjær, 2012; Sandell & Öhman, 2010). While there are a variety of outcomes that can be gained from learning experiences in remote pristine environments, I argue in this article that not all of these experiences necessarily lead to the development of attitudes, understandings, skills, and motivation to live more sustainably. Furthermore, approaches to outdoor learning that

seek to develop connection to and care for wilderness places, at the same time ignoring more local places, could present a dichotomous view of 'nature' to students, thereby disrupting efforts to educate for sustainability. Through examining intersections between the place of experience and the experience of place, I suggest that significant potential can be uncovered for more sustainability focused outdoor learning.

The doctoral research that informs this paper worked with eight educators in Aotearoa New Zealand to critically examine and re-envision school-based outdoor education through sustainability perspectives. The aims of the study were twofold: first, to engage teachers in a process of critique whereby their dominant conceptions of outdoor education were challenged; and second, to enable teachers to incorporate sustainability concepts and principles into their existing outdoor education programs and practices. Further details of research methods will be covered in the next section, which also outlines contextual tensions and trajectories in outdoor learning and sustainability education. The following sections deal with the place of experience in outdoor learning and sustainability education, and how conceptualisations of place interact with pedagogical processes that occur in outdoor environments. The final section of this article offers some suggestions for a more sustainability-focused outdoor learning based on a love of the local.

Tensions and Trajectories in Outdoor Learning and Sustainability Education

As stated earlier, the aims of this research were to critically examine and re-envision school-based outdoor education through sustainability perspectives. To achieve these aims, critical ethnography and participatory action research methodologies were woven together in a qualitative research approach (see Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The research engaged eight educators, six from secondary schools and two from tertiary pre-service teacher education, in a three-phase research process that took place over a 13-month period. The first phase worked to ascertain and critique teachers' existing outdoor education programs, practices, and pedagogies through critical ethnographic methods. Research information was collected using semi-structured interviews, and analysis of curriculum materials such as course/program plans statements. The data was subsequently analysed for emergent themes relating to teachers' perceptions of sustainability issues and conceptualisations of outdoor education and education for sustainability. The second phase sought to facilitate pedagogical change through participatory action research. This involved professional reading, professional learning workshops, and individual action plans through which teachers incorporated various aspects of sustainability into their outdoor education programs and pedagogy. The third phase involved reflection and evaluation by the participants of their action plans, the research process, and the future potential for outdoor education to intersect with sustainability education, through a written qualitative evaluation and semistructured interviews. Research information from all of these phases was then organised and represented in two thematic chapters and five case study narrative chapters. The discussion in this article draws from teachers' perspectives as represented in those chapters. Where direct quotes are stated, pseudonyms have been used to protect identities. (For further information see Hill, 2011.)

A number of Aotearoa New Zealand academics offer interesting contextual insights into outdoor learning and its relationship to sustainability education. Lynch (2003, 2006) has observed that school-based outdoor learning has a rich history in Aotearoa New Zealand dating back to the late 1800s. For much of the 20th century it was linked

to school camping and curriculum enrichment through nature studies, geography, environmental education, and adventure activities. However, from the 1980s and 1990s an *outdoor-education-as-adventure* discourse (Boyes, 2012) developed that served to reinforce adventure pursuit activities and personal development doctrines as the dominant conceptualisation of outdoor learning. From this period, Lynch (2006) suggested 'there is little evidence that outdoor education, in general, met the aims of environmental education' (p. 154). The adventure discourse has held a position of dominance within school outdoor education programs ever since, which according to Cosgriff (2008) has 'sidetracked the focus from outdoor environmental education' (p. 14). In parallel, Eames et al. (2008) observe that from the 1970s environmental education supporters were active in lobbying for the development of EE policy and curriculum. Resulting progress in EE/EfS included the establishment of *Enviroschools* in 1993 and the publication of *Guidelines for Environmental Education in New Zealand* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1999). Over the past 3 decades, outdoor education and EE/EfS have developed alongside one another, often competing for resources. In 1984 the New Zealand Association for Environmental Education (NZAEE) was established and as time went on it distanced itself from adventure-focused outdoor education associations and practices. Although there is little empirical research, I believe anecdotal evidence such as respective conference participation¹ and organisational relationships, point towards a disjuncture between outdoor education and sustainability education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In some Australian formal education contexts, the disjuncture between outdoor learning and sustainability education appears to be less pronounced. At senior secondary levels, academics such as Gough (2007) and P. Martin (2008a) have discussed at length the developmental path of outdoor education and environmental studies and particularly highlight the closer relationship between these fields in Victoria. Other examples of interesting connections between outdoor learning and sustainability education in Australian early childhood, primary, and secondary settings might be found at the website of the Australia Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI). Furthermore, sustainability is now one of three cross-curricular priorities in the new Australian National Curriculum, although it remains to be seen how this might be embraced and implemented.

In Tasmania, my current teaching context, conversations with my students reveal that many outdoor education programs are informed by adventure education models underpinned by pursuit activities, personal development, and leadership. At a curriculum policy level it appears that the content of the new level 2 (Grade 11) Tasmanian Qualifications Authority (TQA) outdoor education course seeks to be a holistic course that focuses on personal development, social and interpersonal development, skills and technical knowledge, and the environment through outdoor adventure activities. The Outdoor Education course document (Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, 2012) claims that these elements work to 'empower students to: develop positive self-image; interact with others in a collaborative manner; and contribute towards achieving an ecologically sustainable world' (p. 1). While this is an encouraging sign for the potential for outdoor learning to intersect with the goals of sustainability education in Tasmania, it remains to be seen how this will look in practice.

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief context for promoting further connections between outdoor learning and sustainability education. An additional layer that adds some insight to this context is the growing body of literature subjecting notions of outdoor education to critical scrutiny and providing trajectories towards outdoor learning pedagogies which are commensurate with, or indeed explicitly informed by, socio-ecological and sustainability perspectives. I highlight three recent publications

to illustrate this point. In their book *Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand: A New Vision for the Twenty First Century*, Irwin, Straker, and Hill (2012), and other contributors, present a compelling case for a vision of outdoor learning that ‘wrestles with and speaks to’ (p. 12) 21st century sustainability issues. This book draws on a number of Aotearoa New Zealand academics and educators who present various perspectives which revolve primarily around the idea that experiential learning in the outdoors can contribute to the goals of sustainability education. In *Learning Outside the Classroom: Theory and Guidelines for Practice*, Beames et al. (2012) place significant emphasis on connections between outdoor learning and education for sustainable development, suggesting that a key educational imperative within their book ‘concerns helping our fragile planet and weakened communities be restored and cared for by engaged, energetic young people’ (p. xi). The third publication, *A Pedagogy of Place: Outdoor Education for a Changing World* (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) critiques dominant assumptions in traditional outdoor education, and presents both a theoretically and practically grounded vision of outdoor learning underpinned by *place-responsiveness*. The advocacy of place-responsive pedagogy in this book is informed by a shared feature of place scholarship, which Wattchow and Brown (2011) describe as a ‘concern about the cumulative effects of modernity upon our ability to respect and care for the local places we call home and the remote places we encounter when we travel’ (p. 51). These three books illustrate a notable shift towards recognising the intersections between outdoor learning experiences and educating for a sustainable future. It is to these types of experiences that this article now turns.

The Place of Experience

Experiential learning in outdoor environments has been a central part of outdoor education and sustainability education for many decades. The foundations of experiential learning/education can be traced back to the progressive education movement and the work of John Dewey (1938). This work has led to multiple interpretations and variations of experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984; Wurdinger & Priest, 1999), which continue to be utilised today in outdoor learning texts by authors such as B. Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, and Breunig (2006), and Miles and Priest (1999). There is also a long tradition of direct encounters with the natural environment in environmental and sustainability education as observed by Sandell and Öhman (2010). While Sandell and Öhman are careful not to suggest causality between direct encounters with nature and sustainable behaviours and judgments, they contend that direct encounters with natural environments can add important perspective to environmental debates and play a vital role in sustainability education. Building on the arguments of Sandell and Öhman, this section reiterates the importance of experience as a key pedagogical component of sustainability focused outdoor learning through weaving perspectives’ of teachers in Hill (2011), with aspects of literature. The notion of experience in this context must be treated with some caution. Are all experiences in outdoor environments conducive to the goals of sustainability education? Do some outdoor experiences actively work against such goals? Why should experience remain an important part of sustainability education? This section unpacks these questions and tensions that might accompany experiential learning in outdoor environments.

Waite and Pratt (2011) argue that one important aspect of education in outdoor places is the embodied nature of the learning experience. Teachers in this research often commented about the benefits of ‘hands on’ learning when they take students into the outdoors. In this way the embodied learning experience works to utilise a holistic pedagogy which engages kinaesthetic/physical, sensory, and emotional facets of

learning, as well as cognitive. The quote below reflects some of the potential power in the embodied learning experience.

The direct experience of nature, I think is a very powerful one ... People come back from an outdoor education experience having had a closer connection with a particular area with a kind of affection. I suspect that without that affection, umm, further progress [towards sustainability] is going to be impeded. (Josh, final interview, December 2009)

Here Josh describes embodied experience as a key aspect or outcome of outdoor learning and frames this in terms of connection with place and progress towards sustainability. He also talks about the power that embodied experiences in nature can have for students in terms of connection and affection. The experiential and situated nature of outdoor learning, as it engages affective or sensory and emotional facets, can have powerful implications for sustainability education in regards to connection with natural environments. As Sobel (1996) argues, it is important for children to 'have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds' (p. 10). In this statement Sobel was responding to curriculum initiatives, particularly in West Germany in the 1980s, which sought to raise consciousness of environmental issues but instead left students' feeling helpless and disempowered. I contend that it is important for students' awareness of sustainability issues to be raised, but simply focusing on the problems may be counterproductive in helping students take action for a sustainable future. Teachers in this research observed that embodied experience in natural environments can have a potentially profound impact on students, as highlighted in the quotes below.

I think one of the transforming aspects of outdoor ed is that you are taking people into a different world. You know, you're taking them back in time in some senses. You're putting them in a situation where man [sic] hasn't had as big an impact as they have in the [city], where we haven't completely modified the environment and it's still in a state where it can impress you with its own self, if you like, its own identity. (John, initial interview, November 2008)

The whole idea with, you know, being bonded with a place, you know, your people and your place, I think is really crucial [for sustainability]. (Rachel, final interview, December 2009)

In the above quotes, John and Rachel reveal perspectives which resonate with Sobel's words. In particular, John refers to the transformative potential of embodied experience in places which haven't been impacted or modified. He speaks of being impressed by a place's identity, which can be an important part of the process of connecting to place. This idea is supported by Gruenewald and Smith (2008) who suggest 'education in connection to place must also inspire in learners an appreciation of beauty and wonder, for it is through the experience of beauty and wonder that we risk opening ourselves to others and the world' (p. xx). This has implications for the way that outdoor learning and sustainability education can potentially intersect. It is perhaps in those rich experiences of beauty and wonder that people can develop the sort of bond with place that Rachel declares is so crucial. If people really care about and love the natural environment they might be more inclined to take action to protect and conserve it. Here embodied learning experiences in wilderness places can offer something of value to sustainability education and outdoor learning.

The above perspectives from teachers have illustrated the possible role of experience, place, beauty and wonder, in developing connections with the natural world. The quotes

below expand these thoughts about connection to place, to reveal possibilities for an ethic of gratitude and care.

I feel like the land, that valuing and gratitude and gratefulness of a moment or of a place, I think connects us so strongly with the earth and the planet and helps me to care for those places on this earth and I think that's so crucial to our survival and more than survival. (Josh, initial interview, December 2008)

If you have a, if you have some kind of connection with the land, I think you have more commitment to, to looking after it as well. (Sophie, initial interview, November 2008)

I think people have to care before sustainability makes sense and they have to care for the environment or people or, ideally, both ... in order for that behaviour to change to, to matter, yeah. (Josh, Final interview, December 2009)

Here both Josh and Sophie reveal perspectives that being connected or bonded to a place can facilitate an ethic of care for that place, perhaps leading to more sustainable behaviours. Of further interest is how Josh describes emotions such as gratitude that might be associated with embodied experience in the outdoors, as a catalyst to developing connection with the earth and our willingness to care for it. Although complex, the relationship between connection to and care for the environment is well supported by literature in the fields of deep ecology, eco-psychology, and place-based pedagogies (see Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Nicol, 2003; Roszak, 2001; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Schultz, 2002). Although space does permit a synthesis of these fields, the discussion here highlights how embodied outdoor learning experiences can be commensurate with the goals of sustainability education through promoting connection to and care for place. Furthermore, in their conceptualisation of action competence, a central tenet of sustainability education, Jensen and Schnack (1997) draw on the work of Dewey (1938) to emphasise how experiences and actions are closely linked. They suggest that people are more likely to act on the experiences they acquire rather than just knowledge gains. Jensen and Schnack's perspective raises questions regarding the relationship between experience, knowledge, and action. Do all learning experiences in outdoor environments help students to develop deeper connections to and care for places? I would suggest not. At this point it is useful to further explore the relationship between experience and place.

The Experience of Place

The previous section mounted a case that outdoor learning can facilitate embodied experience of place as an essential facet of sustainability education. This argument, however, is not unproblematic. Three important questions qualify these concerns. What is this thing we call place? How do different experiences of place support or undermine the goals of sustainability education? And, how do experiences of different places support or undermine the goals of sustainability education? Exploring these three questions is the focus of this section.

What is This Thing We Call Place?

The concept of place is used across multiple disciplines, from architecture to geography. It has been subject to significant theorisation, debate, and discussion over the past four decades, which is well documented by Wattchow and Brown (2011, pp. 51–76). Within education, notions of place have become more prominent since the turn of the 21st century, with significant contributions from authors such as Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b),

Gruenewald and Smith (2008), Orr (2004), Smith and Gruenewald (2008), Smith and Sobel (2010), and Sobel (1996). Place-based or place-responsive approaches have also been explored in outdoor education contexts in recent years through the work of authors such as Wattchow and Brown (2011), Stewart (2004) and Preston (2004). Drawing on the work of Relph (1976), and others, Wattchow and Brown (2011) suggest that 'place is suggestive of both the imaginative and physical reality of a location and its people, and how the two interact and change each other' (p. xxi). In this sense, place becomes imbued with meaning through the interactions that people have with it. Conceptualisations of place, however, are neither static nor singular. In a recent issue of this journal, Stevenson (2011) provides two different perspectives on place. One is suggestive of a fluid relationship where individuals can hold multiple place attachments characterised by the transient features of a postmodern world. The other is that this same post-modern world promulgates placelessness whereby people become disconnected from places through merely residing in rather than inhabiting place. Gruenewald and Smith (2008) suggest place-based or place-conscious educational approaches can be understood as an effort to reconnect education, students, and communities to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain both places and communities. This general tenet is supported by Wattchow and Brown (2011) who argue that scholarship concerning place is galvanised by concern about the sustainability of places in late modern societies. They warn of place being compromised in a world where,

The rich mosaic of land, people, community and local history that constitutes a place can be swept aside and replaced by homogenised experience, epitomised by the trip to the shopping plaza, the drive down the freeway, the massive dam, the monolithic sporting stadium, and the mono crop. (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 53)

Wattchow and Brown's insight here raises questions for the potential for outdoor learning to intersect with sustainability education. Can some versions of outdoor learning, particularly those that might be offered by institutionalised outdoor education, also sweep aside 'place' through homogenised experience? This question highlights the need to scrutinise the different ways that outdoor learning experiences may or may not intersect with sustainability education as explored in the next section.

How do Different Experiences of Place Support or Undermine the Goals of Sustainability Education?

One of the aims of the research that informs this article was to critically examine aspects of teachers' outdoor education practices. This involved the scrutiny of the way outdoor experiences might both support or undermine educating for a sustainable future. I argue that educators must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that all outdoor experiences will automatically lead to learning that is consistent with the goals of sustainability education. Moreover, in advocating stronger intersections between outdoor learning and sustainability education, I believe a cautious approach must be taken when considering existing or taken-for-granted ways of operating in the outdoors. Do all embodied experiences of wilderness necessarily lead to increased connection to or care for place? This question is explored through the quotes below.

It's anthropocentric really, isn't it? Like being a part of nature, but generally we think we're different than nature and we do to it what we want to do to it ... I think that's what Outdoor Ed's been like for sure. Generally I still think a lot of Outdoor Ed is like that. (Tom, initial interview, Dec 2008)

I think we've been as an industry [outdoor education] guilty of—you go up there, you do the abseiling, you do all these things and you don't pay the slightest heed to the area you're in. (Steve, initial interview, November 2008)

Yeah, you're certainly using the outdoors as a stepping stone, you know. It's not there to be appreciated for itself. It's there as a, as a vehicle to umm ... (John, initial interview, November 2008)

The above quotes reveal potential problems with some traditional outdoor education approaches, practices, and activities, when viewed through a lens of 'place' or sustainability education. Tom, Steve, and John refer to an instrumental use of outdoor environments in some outdoor education activities which disregards place. Tom describes this as anthropocentric, a term that denotes a form of human chauvinism where humans see themselves as inherently separate from or above non-human nature, which is consistent with perspectives from authors such as Cronon (1995) and Seed (1985). I acknowledge here that anthropocentrism, and its antonym, eco-centrism, exist on a complex continuum rather than as a dichotomy. It is important, however, to recognise how learning experiences which are constructed to use 'nature' in anthropocentric ways can subvert the potential for the experience of place in sustainability education. Furthermore, the instrumental use of the outdoors highlighted by these quotes calls into question the appropriateness of many traditional outdoor education activities as a means to educate for a sustainable future (Lugg, 2004; Payne, 2002). As suggested by Payne and Wattoo (2008), the use of traditional adventure pursuit activities 'all too often pre-configures and pre-determines a highly anthropocentric, technical and linear-like relation of learners with or in the outdoors [where] the possibility of place is diluted, or diminished' (p. 35). These points serve as a caution. Not all experiences of place in outdoor education offer productive ground for sustainability focused outdoor learning.

How do Experiences of Different Places Support or Undermine the Goals of Sustainability Education?

If only certain embodied experiences of place work towards the goals of sustainability education, how do different 'places' also influence this complex process? The notion of connection to and care of place through embodied experience was a key theme which emerged from teachers in this research. Sophie spoke of connection to place as 'love' and 'respect' for the environment. Josh spoke of 'affection for nature' and a sense of 'gratitude and gratefulness' of a place. Bryn expressed connection to place in terms such as 'appreciation', 'love', and 'intimacy' with the natural world. These perspectives, however, must be considered in context. Many traditional outdoor education experiences occur in relatively remote wilderness environments which are often thought to be pristine. Therefore, when teachers in this research refer to place they are often referring to wilderness environments which may be distant from urban settings. This is potentially problematic in two ways. First, it can focus attention on those distant wilderness places at the expense of learning to love and live sustainably in local places. Second, it can create a dichotomy where students think that nature and beauty exists 'out there' rather than 'at home'. These ideas are explored further through the dialogue below.

Interviewer: Do you ever think about or find it challenging, the idea that these kids might find caring for those places where they go away, you know, those beautiful places where they go on Outdoor Ed trips, as opposed to what they might do in their degraded urban environments and do you see a lot of crossover or connection there?

Bryn: What, that transference from what they did in the outdoors to what they did in the in the city?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Bryn: Do I see it? Umm, I see it develop. Yeah, that's a good question. I've never actually looked for it. I mean I know it's there in terms of attitude in what they say. (Final interview, December 2009)

The perspectives above reveal some interesting questions. Do learning experiences which foster connection to and care for remote wilderness places translate to connection to and care for local urban places? Bryn's perspective suggests that there was an assumed transfer while there was little direct focus on fostering connection to and care for local everyday places. This highlights an important point when considering experience of place through a sustainability education perspective. While few would disagree with conserving beautiful landscapes and wilderness places, I would argue that learning to live sustainably is really about the choices and behaviours we exhibit every day in local, home places. Furthermore, Sandell and Öhman (2010) suggest that nature should not be viewed as something separate from the human world but rather as part of everyday life experiences. It follows then that embodied experience of place, as part of and informed by sustainability education, must surely pay attention to the local. Moreover, what hidden messages are sent to students as they get into a van and drive past countless local places deserving of attention, connection, and care in order to get to the wilderness where they can 'really experience nature'? Does this subtle or subconscious disregard of the local only serve to reinforce a dichotomous view that nature worth experiencing and looking after is something 'out there' rather than in the everyday places we inhabit (Nespor, 2008)? As Boyes (2011) writes in *Bringing the Wilderness Home*, outdoor learning experiences in wilderness can 'privilege remote nature at the expense of more nearby manifestations, de-emphasising the value of local places and their complex, contested histories' (p. 36). Consequently, the experience of different places in outdoor learning may provide quite different educational outcomes. If the goals of sustainability education are to meaningfully intersect with outdoor learning, perhaps the nexus of place and experience needs to be positioned in a love of the local.

Towards Sustainability Focused Outdoor Learning — A Love of the Local

This section briefly explores some pragmatic and pedagogical implications regarding the relationship between experience and place, outdoor learning and sustainability education. Specifically, I would argue for a heightened emphasis on *a love of the local*, which might improve the commensurability of place, experience, and the goals of sustainability education. I acknowledge that calls for engagement with local places is not new (see Bowers, 2001; Boyes, 2011; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Payne, 2002; Preston, 2004; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). My intent here is to build on this work through the perspectives of teachers involved in this research.

One example of a shift towards the local came from Mike who implemented a new outdoor learning experience which he called 'urban tramping'. He and a group of Year 9 and Year 10 students spent 3 days walking and camping in and around their local city. They used public transport to move within the city and walked on existing track systems which extended into non-built landscapes within the city boundary. Mike describes some of his impressions of the experience:

There are sections of that track where there's no indication that you're in the middle of a city, it's totally wild, it's just spectacular, and it's hugely underutilised

really ... It had all the flavour of a regular tramping trip, it had spectacular views, it was exciting, some of it was pretty remote, yeah, it was thoroughly enjoyable. (Mike, final interview, Part 2, July 2010)

In many ways Mike extols the virtues of the local here. He describes aspects of the wild local places he and his students encountered in ways where it is possible to sense the embodied, emotional and affective elements of this learning experience. What Mike and his students experienced fits well with Boyes' (2011) suggestion that 'living in and valuing *local* wild places brings home to students an ethic of wilderness ... Both wilderness and wild local places embody nature and our need to care for it. In this respect, local areas are richer sites for educational purposes' (p. 37). Although Mike didn't make direct reference to place-based pedagogical approaches or sustainability education, his engagement with local place in an innovative way provides potential for more sustainability focused outdoor learning. In order for this potential to be realised, however, I suggest there is a need to critically scrutinise experiences of local places as much as remote wilderness places. The following quotes provide further insight.

I think in order to connect to land and place we need to have some history with that place, familiarity, prior experience, stories etc. (Tom, Workshop 1, April 2009)

How to develop connectedness with an environment or place? We need to make a transformation from being a visitor in a foreign place to being comfortable, 'at home'. Spend time, simple journeys, becoming familiar with surroundings and nature, rather than an outdoor pursuits focus. (Bryn, Workshop 1, April 2009)

I personally like to encourage a sense of ownership of a frequently visited area. With 'ownership' comes a responsibility to look after it — put something back into it — to maintain and improve it. (Bryn, Workshop 1, April 2009)

Two important concepts that relate to the experience of place and its potential to educate for a sustainable future are revealed here. First, the concept of spending time in a place and frequently returning to a place at different times is suggested. Moving quickly through places, or from one activity to the next, as some outdoor education practices do, may be insufficient to develop connection or intimacy with place. In this regard, the adoption of 'slow pedagogy' (Payne & Wattchow, 2008) can be a more appropriate approach for experiences of places which intend to lead to an increased love of the local. Another key concept revealed in these quotes is the idea of putting something back, or taking action to improve or sustain a place. This is more than just picking up litter; it is what Orr (2004) calls a 'politics of place', which drives an ecological concept of citizenship where people take action through a belief that what they do matters deeply. The embodied experience of local places, both wild and degraded, can provide significant opportunities for ecological citizenship that work toward the goals of sustainability focused outdoor learning.

Conclusion

Experiential approaches to learning are ideally suited to developing appropriate understandings, attitudes, emotions, skills, and knowledge that can make a unique contribution to dealing with [global sustainability] issues. (Higgins, 2009, p. 57)

Throughout this article I have argued cautiously for the important role that experience and place can have in educating for a sustainable future. This notion has support in the outdoor learning and sustainability education literature, as indicated by authors

such as Higgins (2009), and Sandell and Öhman (2010). Of course experiential learning alone is not sufficient to address global sustainability issues. As Higgins (2009) also points out, it is difficult to know about complex global issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss experientially. It is also apparent that not all experiences of place are appropriate for meeting the goals of sustainability education. Learning experiences which use the environment in instrumental or anthropocentric ways, or propagate a dichotomous view of nature as ‘something-out-there’, may actually work against the possibility of connection to and care for place. Notwithstanding these caveats, the nexus of experience and place provides fertile ground for enhanced intersections between outdoor learning and sustainability education, particularly in contexts such as Aotearoa New Zealand, where these fields have often been characterised by disjuncture.

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Note

¹ In Aotearoa New Zealand Environmental Education and Outdoor Education organisations have held separate (and sometimes competing) conferences which often have a virtually mutually exclusive group of delegates.

Keywords: sustainability education, outdoor learning, place, experience

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