Artists as emplaced pedagogues: how does thinking about children's nature relations influence pedagogy?

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## Abstract

In this chapter, we explore some of the work of an arts and well-being charity in the UK called Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI), a group of artists, educators, parents and researchers with an interest in how the arts can transform lives. CCI projects aim to open up spaces for creativity, actively engaging with people of all ages and backgrounds. Much of their work involves connecting children to the outdoors. We describe and discuss how the artist pedagogues working with CCI perceive and articulate the positionality of the children they work with in relation to non-human nature, and the significance of the imagination in this regard. We then reflect on what this positionality means for posthuman perspective on the stewardship approach, arguing that humans being both *a part of* and *apart from* nature has important consequences for our capacity to steward the Earth. These artists and children work together in spaces with meaning for children; as such, their work fits with the theoretical framework of pedagogies of place. We explore how the artists conceive of ‘place’ in their work with children and how this influences the way they situate children in relation to both human and non-human nature, highlighting the data on the role of imagination in this relation. The chapter emerges from ongoing exploratory case study research involving thematic analysis of data from a focus group discussion and individual interviews with the artist pedagogues, as well as archival material from the charity. In our discussion of the findings of our study, we reflect on the usefulness of the notion of childhoodnature in this context, showing how this charity’s work can contribute to its conceptualisation, and what it can contribute to current debates around the validity and usefulness of the stewardship approach.

### Keywords

Place-Responsive Pedagogy, Artists, Stewardship, Imagining

## Introduction:

The notion of childhoodnature, whilst new, can be traced back to the dialectics of nature and childhood from Romantic eras where childhood is affiliated to nature both positively (from Rousseau as a state of 'natural' innocence that society jeopardises) and negatively from pre-Romantic eras, where childhood is seen as pre-socialised wildness that may itself be brutal, like nature, or carry original sin, and needs to be trained and civilised through Education. These early associations between childhood and nature via shared innocence have been identified by Taylor (2013) and have also been written about from eco-critical perspectives (Whitley, 2013). They hint at the current developments in the field of Environmental and Sustainability Education research (ESE) and in children’s geographies’, leading a trend towards the entanglement of posthumanism (Rautio,2013; Malone, 2015; Clarke & MacPhie, 2016; Gannon, 2017). What this posthumanist direction entails is a move away from the idea of humans and nature being separate. Posthumanism encourages a rejection of an anthropocentric view of nature where humans can in fact be disconnected from it as Louv (2005) and many others propose, and towards an understanding that nature and humans are one and the same (Malone, 2015). A point of significance here is the way in which such an approach contradicts the notion that humans can be or are stewards of the earth (stewardship: Taylor, 2017; Lee et al., under review). If humans are in fact nature, as beech trees and lions are, then human exceptionalism and human stewardship of the earth become much more difficult concepts. We will return to this notion of stewardship in our conclusion, but to begin with want to show how our investigation of an arts charity working on pedagogy arising at the intersection of creativity, nature and childhood, provides evidence in support of the developing childhoodnature concept.

To achieve this, in the next section we will outline the structure and features of the charity, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI), and the role of the artists within it, as well as introduce their work in terms of the pedagogies of place theoretical framework. Although the research methods are described later, it is worth noting that this initial description draws on the charity’s website, as well as on statements made by artists in interviews about their work[[1]](#footnote-1).

## The Pedagogical Context: Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI)

CCI is an arts and well-being charity helping to shape cohesive and collaborative communities Cambridgeshire (a region in the East of England), and beyond. It began as an artist-led collective in 2002, drawn together by artist Idit Nathan to deliver groundbreaking creative projects, initially in learning environments. Many of the original group of artists, educators, parents and researchers have been actively engaging communities in the region ever since. The organisation became a charity in 2007. Whilst CCI most frequently works with school and community partners, they have been able to develop wider applications for their approach and now run programmes in health and social care settings*.* Common to all their work is a focus on developing a sense of agency and voice for everyone through engagement with the arts.

Children are at the heart of the charity’s work. As one artist, Caroline, says: ‘*Children lead and the way we work, [we] give them the chance to be themselves and to be creative’*. CCI explores how their ideas and questions can lead the way in creative explorations with artists travelling alongside to support the process. A core group of ten artists works with CCI regularly, with others supporting particular elements, as appropriate. It is important to note each artist in CCI has their own individual practice; however for the purposes of this research we focus on the work they do together and the shared philosophy that underpins their approach to CCI projects. Such projects are planned to ask questions about the world, often taking place in communities with specific challenges. CCI’s work is managed by a director and a small team of dedicated and creative colleagues, who work very closely with the artists and those involved with the projects, to shape how projects evolve. There are also a number of people who act as ‘critical friends’ and patrons for CCI. One such patron is Robert MacFarlane who describes a CCI project: Ways into Hinchingbrooke Country Parks, in his seminal book, Landmarks (Macfarlane, 2015).

It is important to note that this undergirding philosophy of giving children the space to lead is like inviting them to be artists and so members of CCI for the time that they are engaged in a project. As Susanne says: ‘*I am working with the children who live around [a site of a new housing development] and trying to take something of the contemporary artist processes to them… I've made… we’ve made all the children around that area into Artscapers, so they get a badge, they belong to this big Artists in Residence group*.’ (see …. Of the Companion book for more details about this project).

The mode of working varies quite significantly depending on the project. Each project usually involves artists working in pairs but how the project begins, unfolds and ends is determined by the participating children, the requirements of the funders, the school (or other institution), the specific artists’ preferred working styles and the place where the work is done. The work can happen during the school day where a year group or class might be ‘off timetable’ for the day, or it can happen in the school grounds at the weekend; alternatively, a combination of different approaches can be adopted.

One example of an ongoing project involving artists that we interviewed is called Fantastical Cambridgeshire. A key partner for this project is Cambridgeshire County Council who provided additional funding for it, alongside the grant from Arts Council England. In this project, artists and children are creating a series of fantastical maps of the surrounds of primary schools in a town in Cambridgeshire through a process of what is described as *creative adventuring*. They do this by working together in a variety of ways on processes that could include drawing maps in one minute (called One Minute Maps), making collages with old maps, a playful way of exploring called ‘found mapping’, amongst other activities. Whilst the artists present ideas by bringing in particular provocations in the form of materials or suggestions for ways to go, the children are invited to lead their own explorations and identify spaces they would like to spend time in – an orchard, the path by the river, and a churchyard have all been investigated in recent projects. In one example, children are provided with chalk and a playground area and asked to draw ‘home’. In another example, they are taken to a cube space about 10 metres by 10 metres by 2 metres on the school playground that has been cordoned off with string. The idea is that they will create a 3D map using found materials from the school grounds and any of the materials like brightly coloured tape, string, wool, newspaper and so forth that the artists have gathered. This is filmed by a drone; the person who is doing the filming has heard about the work and offered to come in and do this. These sorts of emergent methods from an open-ended beginning are a common feature of the way the projects are run. As artist pedagogue Helen, says: ‘*I will take the risk each time that something will emerge […] and it always does emerge, you know, and it's always a bit risky […] but more often than not you will find someone or something that interests you and that will lead the project and then they’ll open the door to other ways of thinking about a place*.’

Documentation is an important element of the charity’s work. Everything is carefully documented and shared on the CCI website and ultimately in this case described above, reimagined by another artist – illustrator Elena Arévalo Melville – who creates unique fantastical maps of these localities. The maps created to date can be viewed on the CCI website. The companion chapter in the book accompanying this publication contains examples of the work of the young artists who collaborated with CCI.

The Fantastical Cambridgeshire project is particularly in tune with what has been described as *place-responsive pedagogy* by Mannion et al.(2013). Set within the field of Environmental Education, place-responsive pedagogy seeks to encapsulate the way in which educators create assemblages of people, places and purposeful activities to create effective learning experiences about environmental issues. Place-responsive pedagogy emerges from the vibrant and active field of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Mackenzie & Bieler, 2016) that has long been popular in the field of environmental education. In privileging the local or in being lococentric, it has been described as ‘paying close attention to the place where you live’ because this is ‘the best way to learn how to perceive the biosphere’ (Thomashow, 2002, p.5). It is not without its critics (see for example, Heise, 2008 and Garrard, 2010) but this ethic of proximity has been accredited with the potential to instil a love of place and an ethic of care for nature by numerous writers and researchers (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003; Fettes & Judsen, 2010). What is different about the place-responsive pedagogy practiced by CCI artists is that their purpose is not to inculcate an ethic of care for the environment, or indeed to address issues of sustainability, but to enable creativity through playful engagements with nature (broadly conceived). So as pedagogues they work with and alongside children, emplaced with them in the places that are familiar to the children; observing, suggesting, guiding and enabling them to follow their curiosity and in creative and imaginative ways, to play with the ordinary until it becomes extraordinary and fantastical. As Sally explains: ‘*I aim and intend always to work alongside children, alongside the teachers, alongside any of the participants that I happen to be working with, whether they're elderly folk or teenagers in a museum*.’

At this juncture, we explain our utilisation of the term ‘emplaced’. Drawing on the work of Michael Bonnet (2012) who uses emplacement to elucidate the way that environmental concern and human sense of place questions contemporary moral sensibilities, we employ emplacement to represent the way in which human action and being is always linked to a particular place, or is lococentric. In line with MacKenzie and Bieler (2016) and others (Malone, 2015; Clarke & McPhie, 2016; Gannon, 2016), we understand place in the posthuman sense, as a fluid entanglement of non-linear time, geographic location, human relationships and memories of prior experiences, current individual experiences and the interplay between these. As such, the practice of the artist pedagogues and the young artists they work with emerges from this entanglement of dimensions. Moreover, as our data will show, this is very much in line with the way these artist pedagogues themselves conceptualise place.

Returning to the exemplification of CCI’s work through describing some of their activities that we undertake in this introduction to our study, another example of a CCI project also described in the companion book, is Artscapers in North West Cambridge, commissioned by the University of Cambridge as part of their public art programme. As Susanne describes it: ‘*they’ve commissioned contemporary artists, quite well-known contemporary artists, to work on that site and I'm looking at the processes and the way that the contemporary artists work. I am working with the children who live around the site and trying to take something of the contemporary artist processes to them… I've made…we’ve made all the children around that area into Artscapers, so they get a badge, they belong to this big ‘Artists in Residence’ group. That project includes sustainability and place and space and the outdoors [… and it is…] to do with communities and the future and how people might live together.*’ (See companion chapter)

One question asked by the Artscaper’s project is: ‘how can children help others to think creatively about planning and implementing changes in a city?’. This approach is similar to the one used in the project reported on by Malone (2013) on participatory city design and the question itself demonstrates the way in which the organisation as a whole approaches children; an approach which fits well with participatory theory. Participatory theory is in part a response to the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child and encapsulates the ethics of treating children as humans with their own rights, opinions and power (Hart, 1992). Environmental Education (EE) has worked extensively with this theory (see for example, Reid *et al*, 2008), particularly as means of doing research where children are given ownership of their data and are treated as co-researchers with the right to choose to be involved and to withdraw, and the right to a voice regarding how data are interpreted. In some cases, children determine the direction of the research, asking the questions and deciding on the research design (e.g. Christenson & James, 2000; Alderson, 2001; Barratt Hacking et al. 2007). It will become evident through this chapter that the way this group of CCI artists works with children is strongly aligned with a participatory approach to pedagogy.

### Place-responsive, participatory pedagogy

What our research uncovers is a place-responsive, participatory pedagogy that emerges at the confluence of children, artists, nature and place that has implications for the childhoodnature concept, and thus for how we see our role regarding the sustainability of the planet. We will explore how this happens in the next section by outlining the ways in which these artists conceptualise the interplay between children and nature and how this influences their pedagogy and the pedagogical philosophy of CCI.

### Childhoodnature through the lens of CCI

In this research, we wanted to explore what emerges from this confluence of an artist collective, nature, place and children in the context of the charity: CCI. We have identified a number of significant strands through the research, one of which strongly appropriates the characteristics of the childhoodnature concept: this is that these artists think about children and nature in tandem: Nature and Childhood the riders astride a philosophical bicycle of openness and disruption. Whilst individual artists have their own particular take and very unique approaches to the projects they do with CCI, collectively they define nature broadly, and they can find it anywhere. Nature might be an object (a stone or a shell) or an action (like breathing) or a process (a nail rusting) and it can be both wild and present in tame spaces. Nature is a disruptive force that leads to creative and critical thinking about familiar spaces. In the same way, the artists share a philosophy of children inhering in nature. Children can move between worlds, disrupting time and routine by allowing themselves to be led by a falling leaf or following a path in a woven structure or a wood that has no particular destination, or being drawn into a puddle whilst moving between teaching activities. This impression was further articulated by the relationships between children and nature was depicted in their drawings; positioned throughout the sketches, in all of the different elements they draw. The data we gathered is, therefore, suggestive of a proximity in the way these concepts of nature and childhood are understood in this context that has a profound impact on how these artist pedagogues work. Their understandings of these terms intersect at a number of points (for example, in seeing both children and nature as disruptive forces, or as fluid, embodying dialectical relations equally). Whilst the pedagogy CCI artists practice is largely child-centred and child-led, their shared philosophy on Nature and Childhood guides their practice in this context and illustrates the notion of a childhoodnature assemblage that underpins this publication. This chapter will focus on the data emerging from our research that exemplifies this strand of our findings.

## Research Methods:

Our ongoing exploratory case study (Yin, 1993) of CCI aims to produce thickly described data of an ethnographic nature within a constructivist, interpretivist framework (Whitehead, 2004). The data collection for this aspect of the project comprised a ‘talk and draw’ focus group interview with seven CCI artists. This was followed by individual interviews with the same artists. The directors of CCI were provided with a questionnaire that was designed after the artist interviews to elaborate on the data generated during the interviews. An impromptu interview with one director was also carried out to elaborate on some of the interview and questionnaire data. Our data is also backed up by archival research on CCI’s detailed and active, constantly updated website.

### **‘Talk** and draw’ – working with new methods

One innovation in these methods was the way in which we set up the focus group, here called a ‘talk and draw’ focus group. We asked the artists to bring in their favourite implement for drawing or painting and we provided them with a large sheet of paper stretched across the whole table to doodle on as we talked. This created a very useful focal point and provided further data for us about how these artists thought about childhood, nature and place and the interplay between them.

These focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were sent to the artists for verification and they made some suggestions and amendments, which were incorporated. The amended transcriptions were submitted to thematic analysis using NVIVO and a process of coding to back up our impressions from the interviews. The interviews were carried out by two of the authors and another colleague; the findings have been discussed on a number of occasions between the four authors and another colleague to check for validity and to increase the reliability of our conclusions. These conversations have also enabled us to draw on the interdisciplinarity of our research team and advisors (including educationalists with backgrounds in Geography, Natural Science and English Literature), bringing our divergent experience to bear on the data and enriching our ability to interpret the data from various perspectives and epistemological framings.

Our extended conversations with the artists as a group focused on these three elements: nature, children and place. This generated a revealing discussion, which demonstrated very strong intra-play between these artists as individuals and interplay in their own conceptualisations of these terms. It was clear that the pedagogy that emerges at the confluence of these three concepts was strongly influenced by their entangled notions of them and their interactions with each other through their identities as CCI artists. In other words, the pedagogy they practice is shaped by the fact that they each individually view place, nature and childhood in broad ways, as open concepts with no fixed definitions or rigid boundaries whose conceptualisation is determined in situ, with fluidity in the context where it is being worked on. A child can only be understood to be fearless or a risk taker when that child is demonstrating those qualities in action. Nature seems tame when in a library garden but in that same place it is a source of disruption when it drops a leaf onto a child’s book as she draws. The pedagogy is also shaped by the interactions between the artists themselves who often work together in a classroom on projects in schools or in communities. Their mutual understandings and long term relationships influences the directions that they choose to follow, led by the children.

With that in mind, the focus of the remainder of this chapter will be an exploration of how these emplaced artist pedagogues with orientation towards nature position children in relation to nature, and what the impact of this might be for the way they design pedagogical interventions. Through this, we will develop the theme of childhoodnature in relation to the stewardship approach and the pedagogy of CCI. In the discussion section, we will use vignettes from the artists’ experiences of working with children in place to illustrate the different themes arising from the data relating to children’s positionality.

## Findings and Discussion

### **Nature and Children in Tandem**

In this section, we include extracts from our data, arranged (approximately) chronologically as the conversation unfolded in the discussion. We also include an illustration from each of the artists from the ‘talk and draw’ activity. We have not analysed these drawings in depth for this chapter, rather we have included them when they elaborate the point that the artists make verbally. This was the spirit in which the drawings were created during the focus group and so it is appropriate to use them in that way here, although we acknowledge their richness as independent data that merit further analysis.

The first observation about our data that is noteworthy is that the vast majority of the statements made by these artists in their discussions of the meaning of nature made reference to children too. This means that their way of talking about nature was proximal to their way of articulating their thoughts on children. Similarly, when asked to show where in their illustrations of the discussions about nature and place they would put children, responses were illuminating. Elena says: ‘*They are everywhere. I don’t know how else to say that*.’ Debbie agrees that they are ‘…*in there, just everywhere*’. And Sally says: ‘*Yeah, I completely agree with Elena, almost everywhere, coursing through the whole thing.*’ These assertions are accompanied by gesturing towards their drawings. Susanne’s way of incorporating children in playful ways in different positions all around her picture is particularly indicative of this perspective (see Figure 3).

Deb says ‘*I put [the child] right in here in his [the wolf’s] mouth (see Figure 1 below). There's an Italian phrase, I can't remember exactly, ‘In bocca al lupo’, or something like that, it means in the mouth of the wolf, and is used to say good luck, but it's about getting right into the mouth of the wolf and being fearless and being daring. So that's what I most enjoy about [children] anyway*.’

Figure 1 In the Mouth of the Wolf by Deb Wilenski with the child drawn inside the Wolf’s mouth which represents fearlessness and daring within nature

Sally then elaborates: ‘*this [illustration] has been made in a different kind of stream of consciousness, but definitely I would have a child hiding inside the shell, you know, there'd be like a big shell and they'd be hiding, they'd have a sense of a secret hideout…you know, a retreat. And then juxtaposed with that the same child might be balancing with one foot on this high wire, [..] taking a risk […] really fearlessly, in the sense of what Deb is talking about*.’ This can be seen in her illustration in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The fearful and fearless child by Sally Todd

What these quotes show is at once a commitment to the immanence of children in these artists’ work, the there-ness of them. It shows that they can visualise the child in any space in which they are working or thinking. The extracts also emphasise an awareness that children are different, that one child might be both fearless and fearful, and that childhood comprises these dialectical relationships in extremes. What is more, both extracts demonstrate how this work between child and artist encourages risk-taking and creative thinking, in line with other chapters in this section of this book.

This proximal thinking about children and nature across artists’ explanations of their perceptions of nature seem conjoined in the way they both talk about and draw these ideas; this begins to suggest the validity of the conceptualisation of childhoodnature concept. It is worth noting that when we asked these questions the interviewees knew that we would be exploring all three concepts (nature, place and children) together so it might have been that this juxtaposition in our method set up the connection. However, whilst the conversation about nature immediately led the artists to reflect on children, questions about nature did not lead to reflections about place. We had to ask a separate question to get at their perceptions of that concept.

### Nature is…

We will now explore the way that these artists think about nature but first we want to highlight that there is a differentiation made here between place and nature. Whilst nature is seen as open and fluid, place is as Debbie says: ‘*the most fluid of all’*. We will come back to this point later in our discussion of place-responsive pedagogy.

#### … a natural object or an action

When asked to think of an object that represents nature, Sally suggested a shell. ‘*I’ve done a tree*,’ says Susanne (with children everywhere: see Figure 3 below). Helen, however, resists the trope of representing nature with an object as too limiting; instead she prefers the way children think: ‘*I think it's that freedom. They’re not preoccupied about what they think other people think it should be*.’ In a similar way, Caroline uses the verb ‘*breathe*’.

Figure 3 Children present everywhere and from every perspective in nature. By Susanne Jasilek

The notion of nature as ‘freedom’ is significant for the childhoodnature concept because freedom is a human expression, although this does not preclude the possibility that other animals also value the sense of being free. In characterising nature in terms of something which is undoubtedly human, Helen’s thinking indicates the dissolution of the nature/human binary. Caroline’s identification of an action that is shared by all living organisms, and is reliant on a non-living element (oxygen) does the same thing. It brings humans into line with other elements of non-human nature. Characterising nature as breathing dissolves the borders between humans and non-human organisms and demonstrates the interconnected of life with its environs through replicated activity (breathing) and sharing resources (oxygen and carbon dioxide).

#### … also human-made.

In our focus group, we had been talking about the fact that the objects chosen were natural and we were thinking about what that might mean, whether that meant that there are boundaries on this concept. Susanne says: ‘*I can’t see the beginning or end of nature, really. So for me I don’t know how to put a boundary on it*.’ She goes on to describe some of her work on the Artscapers project. She takes children on a walk with a small collection bag and asks them to imagine that this is the first time they have encountered nature, what things would they collect? ‘*They weren’t all natural things, they had some bricks and things. […] I suppose it is whatever is on a site, the objects on some site become part of nature really, man-made things too*.’ Again this quote shows how these artists incorporate their experience with children into the way they conceptualise nature. But the comment elicits similar anecdotes from the other artists about their work and how found objects on sites are nature, whether they are man-made or not. Sally says: ‘*that reminds me of the rubbish dump we worked on […] it became a wild nature reserve […] and the rubbish was still bubbling up to the surface […] a really encrusted, like burnt out bit of metal that a young child picked up, and it is in the same quality as picking up a leaf, and she said: “look, a burnt witches house!*” *They did not make the distinction between nature and*…’. Here again we see that not only does Sally understand nature to be present in the metal rusting, but she comments on the fact that the children think the same and more. For her, what is remarkable is that the children will not distinguish between leaf nature or rusty-metal-nature, letting either inspire ‘wild imaginings’.

At this point in the conversation Deb interjects with her experience of carefully choosing sites with the CCI director which will work for the children and not going for sites that are ‘too manicured’ or as Sally puts it: ‘*too landscaped’* but rather ‘*have qualities of being slightly unkempt, definitely wild’*. ‘*So that sense of coming into a wild world that is also there to be made something of by the children.*’ This site-choosing process is clearly very important to the pedagogy of this organisation and their sense of grounding their work with children in a place. It speaks to the notion of place-responsive pedagogy mentioned earlier. In the focus group discussion, it leads to some disputation of place-responsiveness by CCI artists which we will return to later in our discussion.

#### … without end or beginning.

Moving beyond the artists’ articulations about sites and material objects as a way of understanding their thinking about nature, Elena expresses the difficulty of ‘*defining where nature ends and what is non-nature anyway?*’

#### … disruptive.

‘*It's such a broad title, nature, it could just go in every direction,*’ says Sally. And yet there are some boundaries here in our data. There is a propensity towards natural objects and wilder spaces, and their disruptive, arrhythmic, unplanned potential. Nature is about fluidity and openness but it is also about the world out there, we are a part of that but (very human) systematisation of activity and the allocation of time are not. Nature is what provides opportunities that disrupt the ordered, routinized daily living. This aspect of CCI pedagogy has the potential to encourage creative thinking and resilience through its encouragement of taking a different perspective on daily encounters with time and space.

To illustrate this point, here is what Sally had to say: *'I am now thinking about the library garden, which was a very cultivated space, but still because being outside, so it's like an active space, a leaf might drop on a child’s paper while they’re drawing, which wouldn't happen in the classroom, or the wind… There's something about that, okay, it's not an unkempt space, it was a very constructed space, the library garden, and yet it still lent itself to the wild imaginings of young children.*’ As Helen says: ‘*nature provides opportunities that disrupt and challenge that* [sense of the constructed, the domesticated]’.

Continuing this trend towards disruption (a word which Helen has used in her stream of consciousness doodling, see Figure 4 below), Helen says:

‘*I think it's about finding those open spaces and perhaps that's what nature is, within a CCI sort of context it's open spaces where children can be inspired and they’re not defined by other people.*’ Sally elaborates: ‘*I wonder if there's something about the sense of an open space, whether it's the playground or whether it's beyond or whether it's inside in this interior world of our mind, it's kind of like the studio space, like Reggio Emilia sets up, how do we find ways of offering that for children? I'm just thinking about a few days ago […] I was going to [School Z], and one of the children drew one of the playground areas because they were showing me around their playground and they drew the blank space, they called it the blank space, and it was this in a way constructed outdoor landscaped space for play, but the drawing was described as the blank space and I thought that was so beautiful. And someone else said ‘The not really…the nothing really there circle, there's nothing really there’, and then I thought ‘Wow, that's amazing’, and then another child filled it immediately with a knight and a dragon.*’

This quote identifies the Reggio Emilia influence in these artists’ work. Reggio Emilia is an approach to early childhood pedagogy that developed in the region of Italy called Reggio Emilia and was championed by Loris Malaguzzi (Miller & Pound, 2011). All of the CCI artists we spoke to had been exposed to this approach, either directly or indirectly and it is important to be aware of this as it colours much of what they do. The notion of an emergent curriculum that Deb talks about is a particularly cogent example of the way that these artists’ work appropriates the Reggio style.

Figure 4 Helen Stratford illustrates nature and children as disruptive, open and real.

#### … your imaginings

Returning to the way in which these excerpts exemplify nature, what they show is a conceptualisation that is not completely all encompassing but is also not limited to things that are not man-made; rather it is about a sense of being uncontrollable, somewhat intractable, and unpredictable. It is also about the imagined, as Deb says: ‘…*if nature is what's on the ground and it's the things that are growing right in front of you in the natural world, how much of what we see when we look at [nature] is determined by what we imagine about it as well and what we've read, stories that are there in my head, or built, or illustrations or whatever*.’ Here we see that these artists are not only talking about nature as being something that opens out the imagination but that nature is also that which we, as humans, bring to it from our previous experiences. Nature is also our imaginings and this is depicted in Figure 5 by Debbie below.

Figure 5 Nature is Wild Imagining by Debbie Hall

### Place is…

Whilst nature has some boundaries for this group of artistic women, place has very few. This does not mean that place is unimportant, on the contrary, it is central to the way these artists work. Their pedagogy emerges out of their sense of emplacement and responsiveness to the way a place presents itself, both in and of itself but also how children react to it; from the very careful selection of a place described by Deb earlier to the fact that sometimes place is the reason for engaging the artists. Debbie (an artist working primarily with willow) describes a project where the local fire brigade asked them to come and work with the community that used a particular outdoor space  where there were repeated cases of arson and destructive behaviour: *'a huge adventure playground […] which, though in a large green space, was in an urban,* [somewhat neglected] *environment, and part of the project was to actually see if we're sort of re-naturing it a bit with the willow and giving them a bit of ownership of the playground by creating their own stuff there, did that make a difference to how they treated it*?'.

#### …owned and created

This quote brings out ownership and place-making as significant elements of CCI practice. Both of these ideas are harmonious with participatory theories of learning identified earlier. Place-making as it arises here is highly reminiscent of how Fettes and Judsen (2010) outline imaginative place- making. They suggest that conscious efforts by pedagogues to involve the imagination in place- making has the potential to significantly increase the strength of attachment to place, which they argue, can increase environmental concern and positively impact on environmental behaviour. These artist pedagogues value imagination very highly and identify the power that children have to engage it effortlessly, and they actively encourage this through their work with children. In this regard, Caroline says: ‘[…] *children define place, they have a ‘power’- in inverted commas - to actually create a place. From my experience of working with children in nature I always was amazed to see how they could enter nature, enter any space and just make it their own and create place in that way*.’

Deb and Elena add to these articulations about place making in the following exchange, which both emphasises the role of the imagination, but also identifies how selective a process place-making is:

Deb: ‘[*These] narrative ways of making a place your own, or defining a place or saying what does a place mean to them, and especially with the maps that's what I've really enjoyed, that Elena has been able to pick up these different languages of landmarks, maps that represent routes that are actually there but also things which come and go depending on what scale you're looking or what stories you've made in the classroom, that kind of thing.’*

Elena: ‘*Yes, because there are many layers to place.  So a place exists in a physical sense and then in a cultural sense and each person brings to it also their imagination. The maps that I created are just really mediocre snapshots of the projects, because there's so much that has to be left out to be readable. [*But}*we are always selective on how we see space and place.  And of course children are selective as well and they also bring their culture and their imagination and so putting all that together in a single image is always incomplete.*'

#### … also imaginary

This excerpt brings to mind Ardoin’s (2006) research whose work on drawing together place research from different disciplines identifies four dimensions in defining place: the sociocultural, the biophysical, the political economic, and the psychological.  Whilst Ardoin's definition of the dimensions of place is useful and encompassing, and her way of modelling these dimensions to show how they overlap is highly significant, there is something about it that deconstructs the concept too much for the context described here.  Our experience of working with these artists exemplifies a tendency towards entanglement that does not lend itself to deconstruction, rather it emphasises the need to keep all of these dimensions in play at once in a dialectical, relational manner.  Moreover, whilst the sociocultural dimension of Ardoin's model attempts to capture the role of the imaginary, it is somewhat inadequate as it does not capture the active process by which nature captures the imagination, simultaneously reforming both nature and the imagination.  In fact, our data suggest a further dimension to Ardoin's model, which would be called the imaginary.  This is something that Fettes and Judson (2010) also write about, although they talk about imagination more broadly and include emotional engagement, active cognition, and a sense of possibility in exploring imagination as a dimension of place.

#### …time

Another element of place that is significant for these artists is time. As Elena puts it: ‘*place is just completely connected to time and to perspective. I mean you can never go back anywhere, because every time you go back somewhere you've experienced it already, it's loaded with memories, so in a way it's not a constant, so every place is rediscovered in a way, even if you've been to it many times*.’ Besides identifying time interwoven into the conceptualisation of place, this quote speaks to the notion of entanglement in place as it is described by authors such as Malone (2015) and Clarke and McPhie (2016). For instance, Clarke and MacPhie’s work developing Deleuze and Gautarri’s posthumanist perspective on place elucidates place as continuously being recreated through novel and changing relational constituents. These artists are articulating that idea here.

Figure 7 Caroline Wendling Incorporates Time and Space in her Image of Place

About the significance of time in creating a place Sally says: *‘I think it's a kind of critical sense of interrupting the rhythm that maybe is happening in a lot of educational settings. So that's something that we try to bring in, […] that sense of offering a different rhythm, so to really inhabit somewhere, to then build on that relationship or engagement with inhabiting, embodying a space’* and Helen says: ‘*I do it with fluid space as well. Finding an open space is often through opening out time, I think even in those very defined structures of the school where time is controlled down to the last minute, I think saying ‘Well actually you can spend as long as you need’* and Sally adds*: ‘Even if you've got an hour, it's how can you bend time.*’ Helen explains: *‘[…] through detail, really detailed looking at something as well, saying ‘I’ll give you these tools or this possibility and you can just take your time to really look in detail at a space that you might think you know*.’

Throughout these discussions what keeps emerging is the notion of disrupting and de-familiarising and these quotes show how time, as an element of place, is used as a pedagogical tool to disrupt daily rhythms and create new places, owned by the children in a way that cannot be constructed by adult interventions. In encouraging children to play with time in this way these artists are giving opportunities for the children to be creative and to harness their capacity for playful engagement with familiar spaces and objects.

These musings on time in our discussion elicit the following reflections from Susanne:

*‘[…] place has no solidity at all, […] I used to go in like a classroom and then I would say ‘Oh, I want you to find the tiniest details and go and draw them’, and straightaway your room is totally transformed. […] the place just expands and you don't even have to move virtually out of a classroom, and you can do that outside as well, so the whole concept of place is totally un-rigid and fluid, […] and it's just like a sort of…it’s not even a jelly, it's like a sort of magical air or something, in some ways. It's us, it's our minds, the children's minds, they do that, they expand it, they change its shape, they change the smell, they change everything about it just by being with the right prompts or encouragements. You don't have to say very much, they'll just get a sentence and they're off.’*

This quote exemplifies the role that these artists give to the children’s imaginations in determining place. It also demonstrates the kind of place-responsive pedagogy that they both use but also create. So they employ responsiveness to a place by using its affordances such as found items (the rusted metal or the leaf) and a nearby beach as inspiration but also by encouraging children to respond to their own familiar spaces, by ‘*the sense of how you are in our space in a different way, even in your regular space. […] Just a tiny little thing like […] lying down, it’s incredible, it’s quite powerful’ or by ‘drawing the tiniest details’ that make a place expand*.’

Debbie talks about how she uses willow in a very practical way to make children slow down and to bend time. Again here we see how these artists’ pedagogical practices emerge at the intersections of their understandings of place and childhood.

*‘[...] if the school says we want living willow but we want a tunnel […] I will usually try and persuade them that they'd really like a dome. Not only is it stronger…but with tunnels, when [children] see it, they just run straight through it. It doesn't really offer anything other than that, but a dome provides somewhere they can sit, they can chat, they can…I think really they take more time in looking what it is, because they sit down and really be in it and kind of like spot ladybirds on the leaves, and they use their imagination - then it can be whatever they want it to be.’*

### Pedagogy is about holding open spaces for exploration

Deb talks about herself and her colleagues as pedagogues: ‘*We're making space, we're holding a space open, but that is quite an active way of standing back, it's not just passively following where the children go.*’ Here the notion of place-making outlined by Fettes and Judson (2010) is once again pertinent.

So these active approaches of prompting and encouraging children are born out of a sense that, when given space children, as Helen says: *‘[have] that freedom. They’re not preoccupied about what they think other people think it should be’ and Sally says: […] children seem to fluidly get back or get into that state very, very quickly, very readily, so the naming of things is more fluid for them maybe.’* Caroline says: *‘They have still a power to dream and imagine and they do that extremely well.’*

Here we see that these artists conceive of childhood as a state where preconceived notions of what things are, matter less. Childhood is characterised by slippage into realms of fantasy and imaginary and the fantastical and the actual are not nearly so clearly delineated. Alongside this, they see that nature offers means of encouraging that slippage, a means of de-familiarising a place and disrupting every accounted for minute.

Sally says: ‘*that's a kind of trope that we have to learn to do all the time as adults; to reintroduce the sense of de-familiarising familiar, and it's something I think as artists we all are very practised at doing, but it's still a challenge isn't it? Then children seem to fluidly get back or get into that state very, very quickly, very readily.*’ It is clear that, for Sally, art is about de-familiarisation and her perception is that children are very good at doing that.

Figure 6 Place has No Solidity at All by Elena Arevalo Melville

In some sense, we might then think about the kind of pedagogy here as one of place-making through artistic practice. These artist pedagogues provide space for children’s artistic practices in the form of place-making, inspired by nature. They open up the sense of possibility (as identified by Fettes and Judson, 2010) that is inherent in nature for children who, as these artist pedagogues well know, will gleefully and playfully make real. Of course, this work has a feedback effect on the art that these women create with some of them seeing their pedagogy as integral to their art and others taking a different view on this. However, this is something which we will explore in a different publication.

## To disrupt and familiarise - some concluding comments

To some extent our data exemplify the way that a child-led, child-centred pedagogy of the kind practiced by individual CCI artists that emerges from the tandem or proximal manner of thinking about children and nature (a childhoodnature epistemology) elicits opportunities for problem solving, creative thinking and adaptability, in line with the focus of this section of this publication. Whilst our data do not directly exemplify critical thinking and resilience, it is possible to extrapolate that improved problem solving and greater adaptability is likely to increase a child’s resilience and capacity for critical thought. These attributes are important capacities in times of accelerating change and have been shown to be significant outcomes of place-responsive pedagogical approaches. This research is particularly useful for showing how tandem thinking about children and nature can draw out and emphasise the role of imagination in place making. We think the work of CCI has the potential to extrapolate this strand of the childhoodnature assemblage and Fettes and Judsen’s (2010) imaginative place making supplies a useful theoretical touchstone which might be considered in this context. Our findings suggest that their work has the potential to contribute to the notion of a childhoodnature assemblage where it intersects with pedagogies of place.

However, what we think is particularly valuable arising from this research with CCI is the role of the philosophical approach that these artists take to conceptualizing nature and childhood. To return to the metaphor of the tandem bicycle, the fluid, adaptable, open conceptualization and appreciation of these two interwoven but sometimes separate subjects, held proximally, underpins the creative, playful encounters between child-in-place, artist and opportunity that results in the highly imaginative artistic creations seen on the CCI website and in the companion chapter. In this sense, the shared philosophy of this group of CCI artists issues an emplaced pedagogy which corresponds to notions of childhoodnature.

We will now conclude by reflecting on what this philosophical approach means for the dialectic of humans as a part of or apart from nature, and discussing the usefulness of the childhoodnature concept in the context of CCI as a means of addressing some of these dialectical issues. In this endeavour, we bring Michael Bonnett’s (2012) work on the importance of localised emplacement back into consideration. Bonnet reflects on the value of using our very local, embodied relations with particular places as a means for modifying our moral outlook. He discusses the dialectical nature of our relations with place as one of both ecstasis (being able to see our place from a removed position or ‘apart from’) and mutual anticipation (where human and surroundings are constantly mutually responsive to each other or ‘a part of’), and he concludes that, at the very local level, this has potential positive consequences for improving how we treat our environment. Here we will use a similar notion of a dialectic but at a level of our understanding of our place in nature on the grander, planetary scale.

Caroline: ‘*I feel that us as civilised humans have made a separation between us and nature, and the way we look at nature and the way we behaved in the past with nature, comparing it, trying to clean it up, trying to make it less scary for us, more accessible. And then at the same time now of course we are desperately trying to preserve what we consider as being nature, but my question is, is it still nature? Is that really nature? All those little pockets or places that we can go on a stroll, on a walk, and they are all perfectly tidy and looked after. But what is nice, and this is where this thing was interesting for me, is that the idea of children, it's that children have still the power - and this is an important word for me, power - and I put that close to nature. They have still a power to dream and imagine and they do that extremely well. So you can take children just outside their classroom and well, in a little puddle, if they see the sky being reflected or anything it will be a very special moment for them. So I'm just sort of trying to think about nature as something we can all be into it at some stage, and be part of it, and physically part of it, and we don't have to think about it as being something else outside of us.’*

Caroline’s response to a question about the meaning of nature pinpoints the struggle between identifying ourselves as apart from or a part of nature, but also points to how this artist pedagogue experiences that children are not troubled by this dialectic. Neither are children so concerned to separate what is real and what is imagined; as Sally says, the slippage happens easily into imaginary realms. This power of children to dream and imagine and be inspired by nature identified by these artist pedagogues in whatever form it presents itself brings to mind the work of Gannon (2016) and Taylor (2017). Taylor makes a strong and compelling case for moving away from human stewardship strategies because of the way that they influence our thinking about our relationship to the world. It is very difficult to imagine ourselves as a part of nature as many authors now argue we should (Haraway, 2008; 2015; Fettes & Judsen, 2010; Malone, 2015; Clarke & Macphie, 2016) if we are somehow seeing ourselves as responsible for saving the planet. In being responsible, we are at once also exceptional and individualistic. In fact, the logical argument would be that we cannot see ourselves as ‘saviours of the world’ at all if we are to understand ourselves as relational, entangled becomings-with, as Taylor (2017) explains with the work of Haraway. However, what our data from artist pedagogues suggest is that we are at once exceptional *and* integral; that the nature/culture binary is both a useful heuristic and a troubling dialectic. In the language of ‘common world pedagogies’ used by researchers from the Common Worlds Research Collective, the existentialist state of beings-as-becomings-with does not need to exclude exclusion or ecstasis. In fact, thinking of ourselves both apart from and a part of nature, able to operate in both and move between these seemingly opposed positions may hold the key to Haraway’s (2015) call to ‘make kin’. Perhaps in knowing ourselves and others as exceptions we are better able to make kin with others. So rather than avoiding othering we can use our undeniable tendency towards othering (Bonnett, 2012) as an heuristic for enabling interspecies understanding and familiarisation to make kin or ‘family-rise’.

Perhaps children, nature and artists (as disruptive influences) have to fall outside of these definitions so that we can learn from them to achieve this process of kin-making? In so saying, the conceptualisation of nature and childhood as childhoodnature is both useful in its integrative potential and in how it highlights the historical tradition of human exclusion and our undeniable tendency towards othering. In thinking consciously about our tendency towards thinking about humans as superior, we are encouraged to diminish it but we are also able to build on our unique potential to positively influence the sustainability of life on Earth. What is more, if we can think of ourselves as having unique potential we can also think of other species as having those same qualities, at once interwoven but also uniquely able to shape the tapestry. If we think of each organism as having distinctive qualities that have significant influence on the tapestry, but also that that distinctive existence is entirely dependent on their being interwoven, we can begin to move towards an equitable way of life and eco-justice for all.

What these emplaced pedagogues do at once draws on children as individuals and separate from nature but also on their power to slip between this world of ecstasis, to use Bonnett’s term, and the world of integration with nature. The pedagogy that emerges from their emplacement with children in nature is one that both disrupts and familiarises; that both makes real and imaginary. It is a pedagogy that disturbs rhythms and distorts time by paying careful and close attention to children’s curiosities and interests. It is a pedagogy that manages to at once be led by children but also to lead children through exciting and challenging places. In so doing, this pedagogy is one that may enable a journey towards eco-centrism without ever articulating it; simply by being equitable in its approach this artistic pedagogical practice puts children on this path about which more research from the child’s point of view is warranted.

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1. The artists have agreed to be named in this study: we talked to Caroline, Deb, Debbie, Elena, Helen, Sally and Susanne. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)