



The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning

Place-Responsive Pedagogy in
Educational Research and Practice

EDITED BY

Lucy Sors
Ruth Unsworth

The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning

‘The *BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning: Place-responsive Pedagogy in Educational Research and Practice* offers an inspiring exploration of outdoor education through the lens of place-responsiveness. It is a timely and welcome contribution to the growing literature on outdoor learning that underscores the importance of taking education outdoors to provide children and young people with opportunities to directly engage and interact with the world around them. Organised in two parts, the book first blends theoretical insights with practical advice for place-pedagogy before moving on to provide examples of place-based pedagogy in action. With a commitment to experiential learning, this book challenges practitioners to slow down and thoughtfully engage students with their locality thus embracing outdoor learning as a transformative approach to embrace the transformative power of outdoor learning to cultivate deeper connections with place, community and self through place-responsive pedagogy. It is both a call to action and a reflective guide for those seeking to create meaningful, holistic educational experiences beyond the classroom.’

– Dr Emma Rawlings Smith, Lecturer in Sustainability and Geography Education, University of Southampton, UK

‘We cannot underestimate the importance of Outdoor Learning in our primary schools. From Early Years mud kitchens to Upper Key Stage Two outdoor and adventurous residentials, the aims remain the same: to be active in the fresh air and feel good; to embrace new experiences and surprise ourselves; to exist in the moment and feel connected to our surroundings; to take notice and remember the simple things that give us joy. This book is essential reading for all educators who want to spread the word, reshape the curriculum and in doing so change young lives for the better.’

– Mrs Jo Colledge, Headteacher, Ingleton Primary School, UK



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Critical Insights into Educational Research and Practice

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The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning

Place-responsive Pedagogy in Educational Research and Practice

Edited by

Lucy Sors

York St John University, UK

and

Ruth Unsworth

University of Glasgow, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To our daughters

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Contents

List of Figures and Table	xi
About the Editors	xiii
About the Contributors	xv
Foreword	xix
Acknowledgements	xxi
Introduction: Encountering Ideas of Place in Outdoor Learning <i>Lucy Sors and Ruth Unsworth</i>	1
A Pause for Connection <i>Lucy Sors</i>	13
PART 1: THEORISING PLACE-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN OUTDOOR LEARNING	
Chapter 1 – Place-responsive Pedagogy in Outdoor Learning <i>Lucy Sors</i>	17
Chapter 2 – Decolonising Outdoor Learning: Developing Connectedness Through Place-responsive Pedagogy Beyond the Early Years in England <i>Lucy Sors and Louise Whitfield</i>	33
Chapter 3 – Inclusive and Holistic Practice in Place-responsive Outdoor Learning <i>Lucy Sors</i>	53
PART 2: PLACE-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN ACTION	
Chapter 4 – Building Connection to Place: Time and Space in Place-responsive Pedagogy <i>Ruth Unsworth</i>	85

Chapter 5 – Mudfulness? Nurturing a Relationship with Nature Through Serendipitous Encounters with Mud <i>Tracy Ann Hayes</i>	103
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Chapter 6 – ‘No Badge Required’: A Bucket School Approach to Support Teaching and Learning in the Outdoors <i>Louise Hawxwell and Nicky Bolton</i>	121
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

PART 3: CONTINUING THE JOURNEY OF PLACE-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN OUTDOOR LEARNING

Chapter 7 – The Next Generation of Learning Outside: Fostering Place-responsive Pedagogy in Initial Teacher Education <i>Lucy Sors, Jen Huntsley and Stephanie Jach</i>	141
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Chapter 8 – Continuing the Journey of Place-responsive Pedagogy in Outdoor Learning <i>Ruth Unsworth and Lucy Sors</i>	161
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

References	167
------------	-----

Index	185
-------	-----

List of Figures and Table

Fig. 0.1.	Take Five Exercise.	13
Fig. 1.1.	Spatial and Temporal Experiences of Place.	20
Fig. 1.2.	Habitus as Method: Internal Components and Field (Akram, 2023, p. 206).	27
Fig. 3.1.	Adaptive Critical Pedagogy.	64
Fig. 3.2.	Holistic Assessment in Outdoor Learning.	68
Fig. 4.1.	A Topology of a School 'forest' as Educational Place.	93
Fig. 6.1.	Bucket School in Action.	132
Fig. 6.2.	Different Learning and Teaching Activities Can Be Carried Out in Bucket School in all Weathers.	134
Fig. 6.3.	Bucket School in Uganda.	136
Fig. 7.1.	Re-conceptualised Model of Korthagen et al.'s <i>Three Levels of Changing Teacher Behaviour</i> .	145
Fig. 7.2.	'Level reduction' Mindmap of the OL Module.	151
Table 3.1.	Questions to Support Reflection and Dialogue Around Safety and Belonging.	76

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About the Editors

Lucy Sors is a Senior Lecturer and Inclusion Lead in initial teacher education (ITE) at York St John University. She teaches across ITE programmes specialising in outdoor learning (OL), SEND and inclusion, and languages. Lucy has worked as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo), school leader, teacher and researcher in primary schools in Scotland, Northeast England, France and Morocco. Prior to teaching, she worked for organisations supporting children, young people and adults with additional support needs in a range of settings including outdoor education and play-based learning. Her research seeks to include multiple ‘voices’ to inform creative, participatory and inclusive pedagogies in education, stemming from her academic background in social anthropology and development and her work supporting diverse children, young people and their families.

Ruth Unsworth is a Lecturer in Education Studies at the University of Glasgow. Since 2003, Ruth has dedicated her career to exploring education and its practices. Ruth has taught in English state and independent schools and in international schools in Italy and Japan. As well as teaching and leading in primary education, Ruth offers education consultancy, focusing on place-based pedagogy and creative approaches to education. After recently working as Senior Lecturer in ITE, Ruth currently holds a research and teaching post at the University of Glasgow. Her research and publications include new materialist and psychoanalytic perspectives of educational practices exploring the role of plurality, conversation and place in education. She is part of the organising committee for the annual Oxford Ethnography and Education Conference and a member of the International Teacher Education Research Collective (ITERC).

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About the Contributors

Nicky Bolton is Headteacher at Tattenhall Park Primary School. She has been a primary school teacher for 30 years and was delighted to meet Louise whilst lecturing at Edge Hill University. As a passionate advocate of OL, Bucket School evolved as a consequence of her research into *nature capital* – the knowledge and experiences of the outdoors gained during children’s formative years. She is a Primary Science Teaching Trust Fellow and currently coordinates environmental school initiatives between the UK and Uganda.

Louise Hawxwell is a Lecturer in primary teacher education at Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh. She has worked in ITE since 2011, both in England and in Scotland. Prior to this, she was a primary school teacher for 12 years, teaching across the primary age range. She is passionate about the outdoors and in supporting teachers and student teachers in taking learning outside in creative ways.

Tracy Ann Hayes is Associate Dean (Research and Innovation) in the School of Education at Plymouth Marjon University. With a PhD in Transdisciplinary Research in Outdoor Studies awarded by Lancaster University for research into young people’s relationship with the natural environment, she embraces transdisciplinary methodologies that utilise creative and narrative approaches to research nature, OL and play, youth work, community development and informal learning. Publications include: chapter author in von Benzoni, N., Holton, M., Wilkinson et al., S. (2021). *Creative methods for human geographers*; chapter author in Barker, J. & Wainwright, E. (section eds.). In J. Parsons and A. Chappell (Eds.).

(2020). *The Palgrave MacMillan handbook of auto/biography*; and lead editor and chapter author in Hayes, T. A., Edlmann, T., & Brown, L. (2019). *Storytelling: Global perspectives on narrative*. In 2018, she was awarded the Anna Craft Creativities in Education Prize by BERA Creativities in Education.

Jen Huntsley is a Senior Lecturer in ITE at York St John University, specialising in primary English, design and technology, history and OL. Her research is centred on the development of student teachers' learning within universities and HEIs and how this influences their future practice. She has developed novel methodologies in the field of enterprise education research, recently published in Fayolle, A., Le Pontois, S., & Pelly, D. M., (eds.). (2024). *Big questions and great answers in entrepreneurship research* (co-authored with Dr. Catherine Brentnall). Previously, she has worked in primary school leadership roles, both in the UK and in Thailand. She is an advocate of learning through play, creativity and the outdoors and enjoys sharing these passions with her young family.

Stephanie Jach is a Lecturer in ITE at York St John University. She teaches across ITE specialising in history, geography, citizenship and OL. She taught in primary schools in Yorkshire and the North East in England and led primary history and geography before moving into ITE. She is passionate about social justice in education. Before teaching, she worked for an international development charity supporting education projects in the Global South. Her master's degree research in Development Anthropology investigated the impact of volunteers on education projects in Tanzania. As well as OL, her current research focusses on citizenship education using participatory action research.

Louise Whitfield is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Lead in ITE at York St John University. She specialises in inclusion and early years (EY) education and leads on personal, social, health, and economic (PSHE) education in ITE. With a background in primary teaching, she has taught across several different areas in England and has held responsibilities such as key stage leader. Much of her research stems from her interest in EY education

or from her role as Early Career Teacher (ECT) Lead. Her doctoral thesis focussed on ECT identity and how this is navigated against the current educational policy context. This lens also extends to looking at a range of pedagogies to enable inclusive practice.

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Foreword

In an age marked by increasing disconnection from the natural world, the urgent need for holistic, place-responsive outdoor learning (OL) has never been more apparent. *The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning: Place-responsive Pedagogy in Educational Research and Practice* arrives as a must-read for educators, researchers, and practitioners, offering a visionary framework to reimagine education in ways that nurture both individuals and the planet. This book is not merely an academic text; it is an invitation to rekindle our relationships with place, self, and community through the transformative power of OL. This book is a most welcome, timely, and transformative text that is highly recommended.

This collection, meticulously edited by Lucy Sors and Ruth Unsworth, is a timely response to pressing societal, environmental, and educational challenges. Rooted in the foundational concept of place-responsive pedagogy, the book breaks traditional educational boundaries. It speaks directly to educators navigating the post-pandemic era, struggling with the intensified pressures of curriculum delivery and neoliberal performance metrics. By grounding its insights in a dynamic interplay of theory, practice, and lived experience, this book equips readers to rise above these controls and imagine new, inclusive possibilities for teaching and learning.

Central to the book is the recognition that OL holds unrivalled potential to address critical global concerns, including mental health crises, environmental degradation, and social inequities. The authors make a compelling case for OL as a means of fostering resilience, creativity, and a sense of belonging in young people. Highlighting the joy and well-being that nature can bring, as evidenced by the surveys from Natural England, the book champions OL not only as an educational tool but as a pathway to reconnection with our shared environment. Structured thoughtfully, *The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning: Place-responsive Pedagogy in Educational*

Research and Practice weaves together theoretical insights and practical applications. Early chapters establish a robust conceptual foundation, inviting readers to critically examine the role of place in education. Through discussions on decolonising OL, inclusive practice, and child-centred learning, the book challenges our cultural norms, urging educators to adopt responsive approaches that honour diverse identities and experiences. Subsequent chapters illustrate these ideas in action, drawing on rich empirical examples such as Forest Schools, 'Bucket Schools', and playful explorations of 'mudfulness'. These case studies bring the theoretical concepts to life, demonstrating the transformative power of OL across different settings.

What sets this book apart is its emphasis on inclusivity and adaptability. By addressing OL beyond the early years and exploring diverse environments, from urban landscapes to virtual spaces, it expands the field of OL horizons. The authors' call for equitable access ensures that all children, regardless of background or ability, can benefit from the profound learning opportunities that outdoor experiences can provide. As the final chapters turn their focus to Initial Teacher Education (ITE), the text highlights the importance of empowering the next generation of educators. Through innovative approaches to ITE, the authors outline a path towards a future where OL is not a peripheral activity but a central pillar of education.

The BERA Guide to Outdoor Learning: Place-responsive Pedagogy in Educational Research and Practice is a celebration of possibility. It urges readers to pause, reflect and reimagine what education could be when it embraces the interconnectedness of place, people and purpose. By championing a responsive, holistic and inclusive vision of OL, this book offers a much-needed antidote to the challenges of contemporary education. It is an essential read for anyone committed to cultivating meaningful, world-centred pedagogies and nurturing a generation of learners prepared to thrive in and care for a rapidly changing world. This book resonates strongly with me and the direction of our theory and practice in contemporary OL. Read this book!

– Mark Leather
Associate Professor of Education
School of Education
Plymouth Marjon University

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This book has been underpinned by so many experiences, in so many places, with so many people. We are grateful for every conversation, experience, and rabbit hole we have fallen into with our patient and supportive colleagues, friends, and family.

Our thanks and congratulations firstly go to our contributing authors to this book. Their commitment to OL and inspirational guidance has greatly influenced this volume. We thank Tracy Hayes, Louise Hawxwell, and Mark Leather for encouraging us to pursue place-responsive pedagogy as an important area of focus in OL. For continuing passion and dedication to developing OL in schools, we thank Nicky Bolton. Our co-authors, friends and colleagues Louise Whitfield, Jen Huntsley, and Steph Jach have tirelessly championed this project, not least through their innovative contributions, but also through their daily practices as teacher-educators, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in ITE. We know you have enjoyed this journey as much as we have!

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Finally, to our children, Georgie, Margot, and Rose, who continually surprise us through their creative ways of connecting to places. We delight in their muddy escapades that inspire us daily. This book is dedicated to them.

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Introduction: Encountering Ideas of Place in Outdoor Learning

Lucy Sors^a and Ruth Unsworth^b

^aYork St John University, UK

^bUniversity of Glasgow, UK

A Slow Start

Our principal aim in this book is to offer a contribution to the field of outdoor learning (OL) in education research and practice, explored within a framework of place-responsive pedagogy. We explore how approaches to place can help us understand what it means to take education outdoors, and how most effectively to ‘do’ it. The verb ‘do’ may immediately call the reader into action, to try to seek a conclusion, or to focus on *what* to ‘do’. However, if we allow ourselves to ‘pause for more than a fleeting moment’ (Payne & Wattchow, 2009, p. 16), we can escape from the restrictions of time, tuning in to our interests and motivations to engage more deeply with experiences in whatever role we are assuming at that moment. Embracing *slow* enables adoption of a patient, deliberate approach to research, theory and practice, which we rarely afford ourselves amongst contemporary pressures and busy-ness (Clark, 2021). By engaging with theoretical and practical examples of OL throughout this book, we aim to journey to places, communities and ecosystems (Beames et al., 2024), to prompt consideration of place-responsive pedagogy. Threads interwoven throughout these chapters are part of a broad pedagogical exploration of OL. We explore the artistry of outdoor educational practice informed by practice, dialogue, research and critical consideration.

This book is first and foremost rooted in experience. We recognise our intersecting identities as researchers, practitioners, teachers, teacher–educators, students and parents. Contributing authors have stepped inside and outside of each of these roles, engaging in OL in different directions and different places. In a pivotal conversation within the BERA Special Interest Group (SIG) ‘Nature, Outdoor Learning and Play’, we reflected on positives and conflicts within our encounters of education outside classrooms. What became clear is a conviction we all share: that children should be spending more time outdoors and that experiences outdoors should provide opportunities for holistic learning, playful exploration and reconnection. Reconnection to self, others and the world we find ourselves in. It is from this starting point that we begin our collective writing journey. We invite our readers to spend time designing their own pedagogical canvas on this reflexive journey into OL.

Entering the Field of OL

Let us start by situating ourselves within the metaphorical field of OL. Upon entering the field, we find a patchwork of disciplines and terms, each defining itself around different notions of ‘subject’, ‘content’, ‘method’ and ‘practice’ (Roberts, 2018). The multifaceted nature of OL reflects its interdisciplinary background: its benefits, conflicts and challenges have been discussed in the fields of geography, anthropology, health and psychology. Within education research, interest in OL has grown, recognising benefits to mental health and well-being, physical wellness, cultural and cognitive development, as well as supporting growing momentum in sustainability and environmental education.

Wide-ranging definitions surround teaching and learning that take place outside of traditional education settings such as classrooms. The terms *outdoor education* and *outdoor learning*, for example, are often used interchangeably. However, the former is weighted towards outdoor and adventurous activities within the Physical Education curriculum (Sanderud et al., 2021), and criticised for its tendency to conflate different forms of ‘education outside’ under one term (Brookes, 2002). Another term ‘learning outside the classroom’ (LOTCL), as coined by the DfES in 2006

through the LOTC Manifesto, suggests that all children should access ‘the world beyond the classroom’ by teaching curriculum subjects outside with an emphasis on experiential learning: ‘Learning outside the classroom is about raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance’ (DfES, 2006, p. 3). This is problematic in that ‘raising achievement’ indicates a mere continuation of narrowed outcomes valued in schooling that emphasises curriculum over encountering the world (Waite & Pratt, 2017). More recently, Beames et al. (2024) have moved beyond LOTC, with the idea of OL *across* and *beyond* the curriculum, conceptualised as pedagogy which, whilst teaching intended learning outcomes, remains open to the value of the *unintended* (Beames et al., 2024, p. 2). Continuing to position OL pedagogy in relation to ‘learning outcomes’ could negate the value of learning outdoors as an *evolving* and *responsive* experience, to do with development of the self and one’s understanding of the world. That said, Beames et al.’s definition develops a vision with much broader ‘outcomes’:

Outdoor learning is an educational process that allows a learner to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours through direct engagement with outdoor environments, and which provides the learner with a range of personal, educational, and social benefits, which may have wider value for society and the planet (Beames et al., 2024, p. 2).

This connected, holistic understanding of OL incorporates a range of principles and approaches, which may support formal, informal or alternative curricula (Beames et al., 2024, p. 28) and/or step *outside* of organised curriculum teaching. Such plurality opens conversation around the value of the ‘otherness’ of education; for example, open-ended encounters with the world and the importance of unintended learning alongside planned curriculum outcomes. OL involves meeting with, discussion about and experience of dynamic entities; it involves being present in (or thinking about) the things, ideas and people encountered. It encompasses implicit skills, approaches and ‘hidden’ curriculum outcomes that will result from interactions

in different places. It is around this potentiality of an educational *process in places* that we direct our readers' focus.

Essentially, *OL*, in this book, denotes a holistic pedagogy that centres teaching and learning '*in, about, and for* the outdoors' (Donaldson & Donaldson, 1958, p. 17, our emphasis). *OL* simultaneously signifies places to teach and learn *in*, a focus to teach and learn *about*, and an approach that advocates *for* the world outside of policy-curated classrooms. We use the term to provide emphasis on the multifarious dynamic and messy processes of coming to know, understand and be able to interact with the world, the self and others, through experiences. Our use of 'outdoor learning' also seeks to exit the 'learnification' trend in education discourse, practice and research; a trend which over(t)ly focusses attention on learners in relation to defined outcomes and goals, rather than on *teaching* that moves students' thought and action forwards (Biesta, 2010; Biesta, 2023). We reimagine and resituate 'learning' as a consequence of 'teaching' – refocussing the purpose of education as supporting children to connect themselves, others and the world in a care-full, play-full, responsive manner. This entails teachers' consideration and deployment of the nature, character and potential of learning *in, about and for* place(s).

We see *OL* as a key pedagogical approach in that 'education has to take place in the *here and now*' (Biesta, 2021, p. 11); it has the power to enliven and activate students' awareness *of* the here and now. We adopt a place-responsive approach to *OL*, based on the understanding that it can 'take place' anywhere. Teaching and learning is situated in *places*: a presentness in space-time that is entangled with sociocultural histories, long-established ways of being and knowing, and spaces of possibility that open through place-based encounters. This vision for *OL* is inherently *responsive*, adapting to changing contexts, demands and pressures in both local and global contexts. We therefore underpin our discussion of *OL* with place-responsiveness to consider *connections* between physical situations, *processes* of encounter and *reflections* on experience. This concerns *what, where* and *how* we teach and learn but also *why* we teach what we teach and learn what we learn (Waite & Pratt, 2017).

The Urgency of OL

The history and evolution of OL has been previously explored (see, e.g. Oglivie, 2013), and we do not wish to replicate this here. Instead, we focus on the urgency of OL in the *here* and *now*. OL is of particular importance in current educational landscapes in western contexts where neoliberal post-pandemic social trends place great emphasis on ‘delivery’ of, and ‘catch-up’ within, prioritised national curriculum subjects. In England, as in many countries, time outside for children is in decline, both at home and at school (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). We know from recent national surveys conducted with children and young people (CYP), that being in nature has a positive impact on their emotional and cognitive well-being. However, we also know that two-thirds of children are not provided with opportunities to do activities or lessons outside at school aside from PE and that nearly half of CYP surveyed did not feel a ‘high’ connection to nature (Natural England’s Children’s People and Nature Survey for England, 2023). Decline in active experience of natural places and disconnection to the world are associated with a real risk that ‘the next generation of UK adults will be the least healthy in living memory’ (D’Souza, quoted by the Children’s Alliance, 2021, n.p.). Mental and physical health crises overwhelm public services and create extreme challenges to educational provision and inclusion (DfE, 2023). Contemporary OL research engaged with throughout this book builds on the multiple benefits of being outside to explore how education may provide opportunities to participate in authentic, memorable and connected learning experiences. This is an inherently *responsive* approach, which seeks to actively address social, environmental and historical inequalities through critical engagement with *world-self-others* encounters. Experiences in OL are planned to transcend typical educational settings, challenge prescribed educational agendas and reconnect humans to the world. (Mannion & Lynch, 2016; Muñoz, 2009).

Present and future uncertainties surrounding climate change and global conflict have reawakened conversations around the types of experiences and skills that CYP need throughout (and outside of) formal education. There is a disconnect between national curricula and research/profession-led ‘movements’ in this

regard. Despite the pressures of contemporary society and global threats to human existence and individual well-being, educators are asked to ‘forget’ or ‘ignore’ wider world issues in the drive to deliver a prescribed educational agenda (Biesta, 2021). Simultaneously, the importance of transferable skills has been established, such as problem-solving, adaptability, critical and innovative thinking and intra/interpersonal skills for future-proofing the next generation in a world of constant change (UNESCO, 2016).

Advocates of OL recognise its ability to introduce responsiveness, risk and challenge; to build resilience and resourcefulness in varying contexts (Beames et al, 2024). A quiet rebellion is mounting against mainstream neoliberalist ideologies of performativity, to offer alternative visions such as ‘world-centred education’ (Biesta, 2021) and education that prioritises connectivism, learner agency and adaptability to change. However, whilst these are important ideas, they currently remain mainly abstracted; detached from the contexts and realities in which they could lend value. In this book, we seek to ground the important elements of contemporary educational thinking that can inform curriculum design and implementation. Chapters make suggestions around practice that can build connections, support teacher and learner agency and build robust approaches to adaptability. We aim to promote criticality by questioning assumptions about education, ‘progress’, society and culture. Thus, the case is made for place-responsive learning within the development of educational practice that will foster inclusion, individual agency and personal and societal responsibility to the world, ourselves, and others. We situate these considerations physically, temporally and as lived experience in an OL context. In this way, we develop a response to world-centred education and related philosophy, that ‘entails an intervention at the level of educational practice’ (Biesta, 2025, p.536). This involves raising practitioner awareness of *place*, (and encounters in and with places), and its role in forging world-self-other connections.

Towards Place-responsive Pedagogy in OL

Whilst it is important to recognise the diversity of discourse and growing significance of the field of OL, it is useful to find a perspective to speak to this diversity amongst a scarcity of research

that pays attention to its theoretical foundations (Hawxwell et al., 2019). There are difficulties in any endeavour to theoretically unify diverse practices: there is unlikely to be a single definition of OL that suits the variegated forms of experiences which happen outdoors. Arguing for such a definition might be restrictive or reductive to the opportunities presented by OL and something of a conceptual minefield. Instead, we present a question that runs throughout this book: how might considerations of *place* in relation to *education* be useful to OL?

It is perhaps useful to first consider the large terms of education and place. Through an education-focussed research community, the editors of this book found themselves united by discussions of ‘what is education?’. Our experiences teaching and studying abroad, interests in socio-cultural understandings of place, academic histories rooted in social anthropology and a shared passion for travel and the outdoors; this is what informed our reading of education. For us, education is fundamentally a belief in a purposeful, responsive act which has transformative power to guide a social ‘becoming’: a leading of attention *towards* becoming in life, in the world and with others (Ingold, 2018). Different worlds demand and instruct different encounters and different pedagogical responses. This demands a multi-versal approach within the social principles of ‘world-centred education’; which ‘world’ are we seeking for our children to ‘meet’? This is not a ‘one-catch-all’ standardised model of education; it needs to be *responsive* to people, places and times and implement mindful inclusion. It is an education that seeks to address barriers to the world and open opportunities to engage with it.

Returning to the *process* of education, this visualises teaching as a variety of encounters between people, materials, ideas, memories, wishes, etc., which intricately entangle as a tapestry of *becoming*. Having engaged in ethnographic enquiry, immersing ourselves in various ‘fields’, we view the tapestry of education (and of this book) as woven by history, philosophy, anthropology, politics, psychology, language, art, sociology and geography ... in short, informed by interdisciplinary in-world exchange. Culture, belonging and human behaviour lie at its heart, pivoting around the ‘here and now’ of place. We firmly believe in foregrounding and acknowledging lived experience in

and of education, and the necessity of complicating what may at first seem quite simple ideas: for example, the notion of where learning takes place and its relation to educational intentions.

Whilst there are many aspects of our philosophy of education which we could focus on, this book takes up and interrogates *place* through the voices of contributing authors who, despite differences in our experiences, all relate to a shared aim: the desire to disseminate practice and research around the value of place-responsive pedagogy in OL. Learning from our own ventures into the outdoors as educators, researchers and in our personal lives, we understand place-responsive pedagogy as a valuable approach to support, improve and restore relationships between humans and the world (Mannion & Lynch, 2016). We delve deeper into notions of place in Chapter 1; however, broadly speaking, we see place as a continuum, made not only of material physicality, but also of ideas of place, of cultural signification and practices that must be considered in facilitating a relationship with the environment. An indoors/outdoors binary is, therefore, unhelpful. Instead, a shift towards ‘*ideas of place in education*’ (Rawlings Smith & Pike, 2024, our emphasis) supports a broader vision for place in OL. Place-responsive learning in, about and for the outdoors can take place outdoors or indoors: in nature or urban environments, indoors interacting with outdoor artefacts, in transient, fixed or fluid places, in virtual spaces or imaginative places (Beames et al., 2024). Place-responsive pedagogy is focussed on how teaching (as the deliberate enactment of an educational philosophy) may facilitate experiential connections, through curation of place-based responses and sensory experiences, support critical knowledge of a place’s historical and cultural space-time, and build relationships.

In our explorations of place-responsive pedagogy in OL, we build from an insightful collected volume *Encountering Ideas of Place in Education* (Rawlings Smith & Pike, 2024), which explores place-based approaches in different research contexts and studies. We offer place-responsiveness as a way of educators preparing for the wide range of inextricable and unpredictable educational outcomes resulting from encounters with place. Preparing in this sense is about getting ready to encourage, and remain open to, the endless possibilities of place-response, mediated by action, relationships and activity that