

The places we live, work and play are where sustainability becomes more than an abstract term. We might think that loving a place means we would care for it, but as Jo Thompson describes, the relationship is complicated.

## TRANSFORMING SECONDARY STUDENTS' ETHIC OF CARE INTO ACTION

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### ABSTRACT

Place-responsive outdoor education is one way to potentially connect and 're-wild' our school students to their place and to nature as a whole. Through this, they may develop an ethic of care. There is an assumption that by developing an ethic of care and responding to place, people will take action to look after or improve their place. However, little research has been conducted to date to show that there is a link between attachment to place and pro-environmental behaviour or taking action. This paper suggests how any potential ethic of care developed from the place-responsive outdoor education journey could be transformed into motivation for students to act for place, by adapting the journey to incorporate environmental advocacy sessions using Birdsall's (2010) model for learning about environmental action.

This research uses a phenomenography approach to study the experiences of a group of secondary school students engaging in a series of environmental advocacy sessions based on the place-responsive outdoor education journey to help them reflect and consider what response they might make to their experiences. Following these sessions, an interview was held with each student to explore their perceptions of an ethic of care leading to action. Data in the form of interview transcripts were analysed and thematically organised.

The students indicated great enthusiasm and motivation to take action as the environmental advocacy sessions began. They decided to use a voting system to decide on the final action to take, which led to some students disengaging at this point as they may not have seen the personal relevance of the specific action chosen. For many of the students, other priorities and pressures made them feel too busy to make the time to take action. The findings indicate that students who have made repeat visits to a specific place have a stronger connection to it, and suggest that this is a predictor of them continuing to take action or display pro-environmental behaviour in response to their experiences.

### TRANSFORMING AN ETHIC OF CARE INTO ACTION

Our consumption and over-use of natural resources keeps climbing, and it has been projected that humans will exceed the regenerative capacity of the earth by 75 percent by 2020 if current trends remain constant (World Wildlife Fund, WWF, 2016). Changing our behaviour to live more sustainably is a slow process, as tangible worries like job security and finances often displace our concern for the planet (Stoknes, 2015). The over-consumption and

climate change message is often framed by the idea of impending doom, with an emphasis on giving up things we value. We have heard this disaster message so many times now that we are de-sensitised to it (Stoknes, 2015). Part of this de-sensitisation appears to be related to our increasing disconnection from nature, partly the result of greater urbanisation and accelerated cultural change.

Part of the solution is place-responsive outdoor education, which can engage students with 'their' place and 'their' community. This approach can begin developing an ethic of care (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), encouraging young people to be intrinsically motivated to take action over specific issues in their own place. If they care, they will take action – or at least this is the assumption.

A gap exists in current research between an ethic of care developed through place-responsive outdoor education, on the one hand, and taking environmental action, on the other. This study explores ways of bridging this gap, taking people from a place of caring through place-responsive outdoor education to being intrinsically motivated to take environmental action. This article thus poses the question (drawn from the second part of my research): How does an 'ethic of care' developed from a place-responsive outdoor education journey motivate students to act for place?

## THE RESEARCH

How do you design a programme that encourages people to be intrinsically motivated to act? There is a body of literature on place-responsive outdoor education and ways of encouraging students to develop an ethic of care (for example, Bratman *et al.*, 2015; Gruenewald, 2003; Irwin, 2008; Stevenson, 2008; Townsend, 2011; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The first part of my research deals with this question, and concluded that all the participants were beginning to develop an ethic of care. There is also plenty of research on environmental action and how it is understood (for example, Birdsall, 2010; Eames & Barker, 2011; Jensen & Schnack, 2006; Mogensen & Schnack, 2010). However, I could find no research that does more than suggest that place-responsive outdoor education will motivate us to act (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). There are, however, studies that explore people's motivations to demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour (PEB).

Pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) has been shown to have a link with attachment to place (Rioux, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Specifically, attachment to the natural environment is a greater predictor of PEB than attachment to the urban environment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Identity is also a significant predictor of people's intention to perform PEB, particularly if they have a 'green' identity (Gatersleben, Murtagh, & Abrahamse, 2014). This suggests a link between personal identity, on the one hand, and place and community (Penetito, 2008).

Having designed a place-responsive outdoor education journey involving a range of community members, with the aim of developing an ethic of care directed to this place, as the first stage of my research, my findings concurred with Wattchow and Brown (2011) that a place-responsive journey can begin to develop an ethic of care for place.

To design the research methodology that would enable me to plot the transforming of caring into action, I adopted Birdsall's (2010) three-part model for teaching students about action holistically, which includes learning *about* action, learning *through* action and learning *from* the action undertaken (Birdsall, 2010). This model would potentially enable the students to think about how the future could look and how they could achieve this vision for change. They would get to experience planning the action they had decided on and taking part in it. Finally, they would get to reflect on the action they had taken, allowing them to think about how effective and successful it was.

In order to show the intersections between place-responsive outdoor education and education for sustainability, I reshaped Wattchow and Brown's (2011) four signposts and Birdsall's (2010) three-part learning model by utilising environmental education's emphasis on education in, for and about the environment (Barker & Rogers, 2004). Figure 1 shows the interconnections between moving from an ethic of care to motivation to act – my sole concern in this article.



This new framework model informed the design of the environmental action part of this research.

## THE RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION SESSIONS

The environmental part of the study was designed and organised by the two women running the sessions and myself. I played a big part in this stage in order to ensure that the sessions incorporated the theoretical framework of both place-responsive outdoor education and environmental action into the design. To provide some context, here is a brief outline of the three sessions:

- Session one revisited the students' journey, mapping out where they had been, what they had experienced and seen, who they had met and what they were doing in the community.
- Session two looked in greater depth at the various 'issues' that the students had identified during the journey and which ones they showed a particular interest in. The students split up into groups depending on what issue they wished to explore. They were then shown how to start researching the issue and thinking about possible actions they could take to deal with the problem. They all left this session with some research to do before the final session.
- The final session showed the students how to use their research and ideas to create a plan for action that was achievable for them. Some of their plans needed a little more work and permission to be gained from both the school principal and others if they were to take the planned action.

The students then had three weeks from the end of the environmental action planning sessions to give them enough time, if motivated to complete their action, before the interview.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION SESSIONS

In this study, I was seeking to gain an understanding of the students' perspectives and their motives and motivation in choosing to either take meaningful environmental action or not, as the case may be. I utilised an interpretive lens based on phenomenography that would allow me to explore the different ways that the students "experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects" (Marton, 1986, p. 31) of environmental action. With phenomenography as the chosen research approach, the study would need to be based on qualitative data, as this type of data is most appropriate to this research methodology.

The specific methods I chose to use for this study were semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs). Using photographs as the focus of the interview can help share the power between the interviewer and the participant (Miller, 2015). This sharing of power was important to me, as the participants were all Year 10 students, aged 14 or 15. Taking photos also enabled the students to continue their reflections following the environmental action sessions.

All the students were given disposable cameras and basic instructions for using them. They also received brief instructions about the kinds of photos they might take: "Take photos of what preparing for environmental action is like for you – ensure the photos reflect what it is like for you while planning the action. You are encouraged to think about what you might like to take the photos of – there are no expectations of what type of photos you should take."

The interviews were conducted three weeks after the final environmental action session. It involved six out of the 12 students, who had their names randomly chosen from a hat by their teacher. The interviews lasted between five and fifteen minutes. The interviewer asked the students to talk through their photographs, and then use them to answer five questions about the sessions:

1. This is my favourite photo from the action because ...
2. This photo from the action makes me feel ... because ...
3. This photo of ... shows what the action was like for me best because ...
4. What I liked most about being involved in the action process was ... because ...
5. What I liked least about being part of the action process was ... because ...

There were some additional questions using Birdsall's (2010) three-part model as a scaffold for designing the questions; these were used as prompts. The interviews were used to explore not only what the students had learnt about the action, but also whether they had in fact followed through and taken the relevant action.

Although planned as PEIs, in practice the interviews turned into straight semi-structured interviews. Many of the students took their camera home and forgot to bring it with them to the environmental action sessions, or they forgot to take photos, as I was unable to be at these sessions observing. This highlighted the potential challenges in using PEI, some of which could have been overcome if the school had allowed the students to use their phones for taking photos.

The interviews were transcribed and, keeping an open mind, I highlighted anything that seemed of interest or relevance. To aid my analysis, I also used a theoretical framework drawn from the literature to help guide my interpretation of what was relevant. These items were then organised into categories based on a theme.

## FINDINGS

In analysing the data from the interviews (that took place three weeks after the environmental advocacy sessions had finished), four general themes emerged – learning about action, learning through action, learning from action and pro-environmental behaviour. These themes were unpacked to show how the ethic of care that the students had begun to develop transferred into motivation to take action.

Learning about action and how to create an achievable solution to a problem is important if we want students to feel successful and realise that they can make a difference (Birdsall, 2010). The environmental advocacy sessions began by getting the students to reflect on the journey they had been on. As Leah explained: "We just, like, talked about what we did on the adventure and about the sorta things we learnt. What actions were possible and, like, how they related to something we learnt" (Leah, interview 2). After identifying some issues through reflection, participants then formed small groups and brainstormed ideas relating to what they could do, what interested them and what connected to what they had learnt on the journey.

Two leading ideas were formulated by the group. Running a morning fitness style session to get people outside and recycling Recycling was the most popular option for action, due to the emotional impact that the plastic issue had on the students. As Evie explained: "We went to the [bird] colony. We saw that bird with all the plastic there, and we had to go down to the beach and pick up the rubbish, and on the island, Queenie, she told us about all the process that the rubbish had to go through and we thought, that would be a good thing [to do]" (Evie, interview 2).

Participants used a group decision process to decide the issue they wanted to pursue and what action they wanted to take. Exactly how this happened is a little unclear: Leah told me afterwards that the group voted on which

action to take through to the planning stage. Sophie felt that "it was our ideas, but they [group leaders] chose it." This difference in views may account for some of the participation and motivation issues that occurred later. After deciding on the issue they wanted to address and doing some research, the students moved on to start planning their action.

Learning through action is an important step for students if they want to find a solution to specific problems and see that it is possible to do so. After learning about action, it was time to start planning. As Evie explained: "We planned an action on what we were going to follow through on, the things we learnt, and for that we chose recycling – so we learnt a bit about that and made a plan" (Evie, interview 2). The plan chosen was to teach people how to recycle. The process helped the students create a plan for the specific action they were thinking about taking. For one student, "the planning really helped you, kind of, like, look at what you actually learnt and, like, sort of process that more" (Leah, interview 2). None of the other students thought quite so deeply about what they had learnt.

It was during the planning phase that students' participation started to vary. One student lost motivation, as she didn't agree on the age group of students participants chose to work with. Another student told me what they had planned to do the action on, but could not say if the group had actually ended up carrying out an action.

The motivation of three of the six students seemed insufficiently low to complete the planning for the proposed action. This may have been due to the age group they planned to work with, or that they preferred to carry out an action relating to an alternative goal, physical fitness. However, Ivy offered a view of the group working cohesively together: "I think I like how we worked together on this instead of going off into our own groups and doing our thing" (Ivy, interview 2).

The lack of motivation shown by some of the students manifested in a failure to prioritise and make time to meet up. As Yasmin explained: "Our group leader, she was trying to organise a time for us to meet up during, like, lunchtimes, but everyone was busy, or couldn't come or wasn't in school" (Yasmin, interview 2). Finding the time to plan and take action was an issue for participants, as Leah explained: "At first we wanted to go to the primary school, but then we were running out of time." Although Ivy claimed to have the motivation to be involved, she had unfortunately been off school ill for most of the time that the environmental advocacy sessions had been running, and also for the subsequent final planning session.

I was interested to find out if any action had in fact been carried out. Evie told me that "we went to, some of us, the kindergarten ... and we taught them about recycling," yet also explained that she hadn't actually carried out the action herself. Leah, on the other hand, did get involved with taking action along with two other students, one of whom was not in the interview group. Thus one action took place that involved two of the six students in the study.

For one student, a reflective outcome of doing the action was being able to give back to the community. As she said, "I thought it would be a really good thing to do and be able to give back to the community after they kinda gave to us during the backyard adventure [place-responsive outdoor education journey]" (Evie, interview 2).

One of the major objectives of this study was to investigate if the participants would be motivated to take action if the scaffolding was put in place for them to learn about action and how to plan an action. The final part of the study involved exploring if doing this would give the students the resources that, having been used, would have a long-term impact on them. This impact might include modifying their behaviour in order to reduce their negative impact on their place (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), or testing if they now felt empowered to continue taking action on either this issue, plastic waste or any other environmental or sustainability issue facing their place.

Would the students continue to take appropriate action? Three out of the six participants replied they might take some action in the future. Evie was the most enthusiastic: "If there is something to do like volunteering or something or, like, a community garden ... I think I would be pretty keen to help the community and give back some" (Evie, interview 2). This statement indicated that she had gained the motivation to want to take further action. Evie

continued: "I am doing a Hillary Award, the young New Zealanders, and for that one of the things is volunteering or some community service type stuff" (Evie, interview 2). Thus Evie's motivation may also have been stimulated from an extrinsic source  $\neg$  completing her Hillary Award. Another student was potentially keen to continue taking action; this time the extrinsic motivation was being paid to do so. The final student who stated that they might take some action said: "I'm not sure [if I'll take any further action] I ... we are all quite busy ... I would like to do something ... possibly next year join the enviro group or Interact or something, which does like service stuff" (Leah, interview 2). This response indicated that she wasn't currently prioritising environmental action. It would be interesting to go back and see if she actually continued to be too busy or prioritised joining one of these groups. The other three students didn't see undertaking action as a priority. All three stated they were too busy and didn't have time.

As a final question, I asked the students if they had changed anything in the way they lived as a result of what they had learnt during the journey or from the environmental advocacy sessions. Skye explained that she had learnt that it was good to reduce the amount of plastic waste, "because it'll make New Zealand more healthy and clean and looking nice" (Skye, interview 2). When probed further to see if she had changed anything about the way she lives, her answer was "No" (Skye, interview 2). On the one hand, Skye understands why it might be important to reduce plastic waste, and yet she hadn't managed to follow this insight through to examine how her own behaviour might affect this issue. This suggests that although she appreciates the value of pro-environmental behaviour, non-environmental motivations of convenience are stronger (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Only one of the six students made the connection, admitting that their behaviour could have an effect on the issues affecting their place. Leah explained: "I am more aware of stuff and, like, how much food we kinda put away, like waste – and my lunch box, I've tried to use more sustainable kinda wrapping for my food" (Leah, interview 2). Thus of the six students interviewed, only one reported having sustained any kind of pro-environmental behaviour at the end of the environmental advocacy sessions.

## DISCUSSION

A number of points emerged from the study findings: the loss of engagement during the planning of the action stage; motivation and priorities; and action competence. These findings led to a revision of the model plotting the intersections between place-responsive outdoor education and environmental action (see Figure 2).

In this revised model, the link between learning from action to further learning about action has been removed, as the students in the study gave no evidence that this connection had been made. Had there been a more measurable action and facilitated reflection, this gap might have been rectified. The line connecting learning from action with representation of place has also been removed, as once again participants failed to indicate that taking a particular action and the ensuing reflection had influenced, changed or affected their representation of the city. Again, a more facilitated reflection investigating the success of a more measurable action may have retained this link.

As the students transitioned from 'learning about action,' this was the point where the first barrier (solid red line) prevented them from continuing through the web. Although some participants saw the group action as either inappropriate or unachievable, this wasn't the case for everyone – hence the blue arrow continuing to 'learning through action.' The second barrier is the potential cognitive/affective dissonance that prevents people from moving from caring to having the motivation to act. Another potential barrier at this point might be the failure to complete the learning cycle  $\neg$  many participants disengaged after learning about action and therefore failed to learn about planning, taking or reflecting on action.

The blue arrow passing through the final barrier suggests that one may need to navigate the web depicted in the

model multiple times, in order to deepen the connection with and belonging to place, before an ethic of care and the belief that actions can make a difference become strong enough to motivate a person to act. This deepened sense of connection may also lower the barrier of 'being too busy' that many of the students gave as the reason for not following through on their learning about action or progressing to take some action.

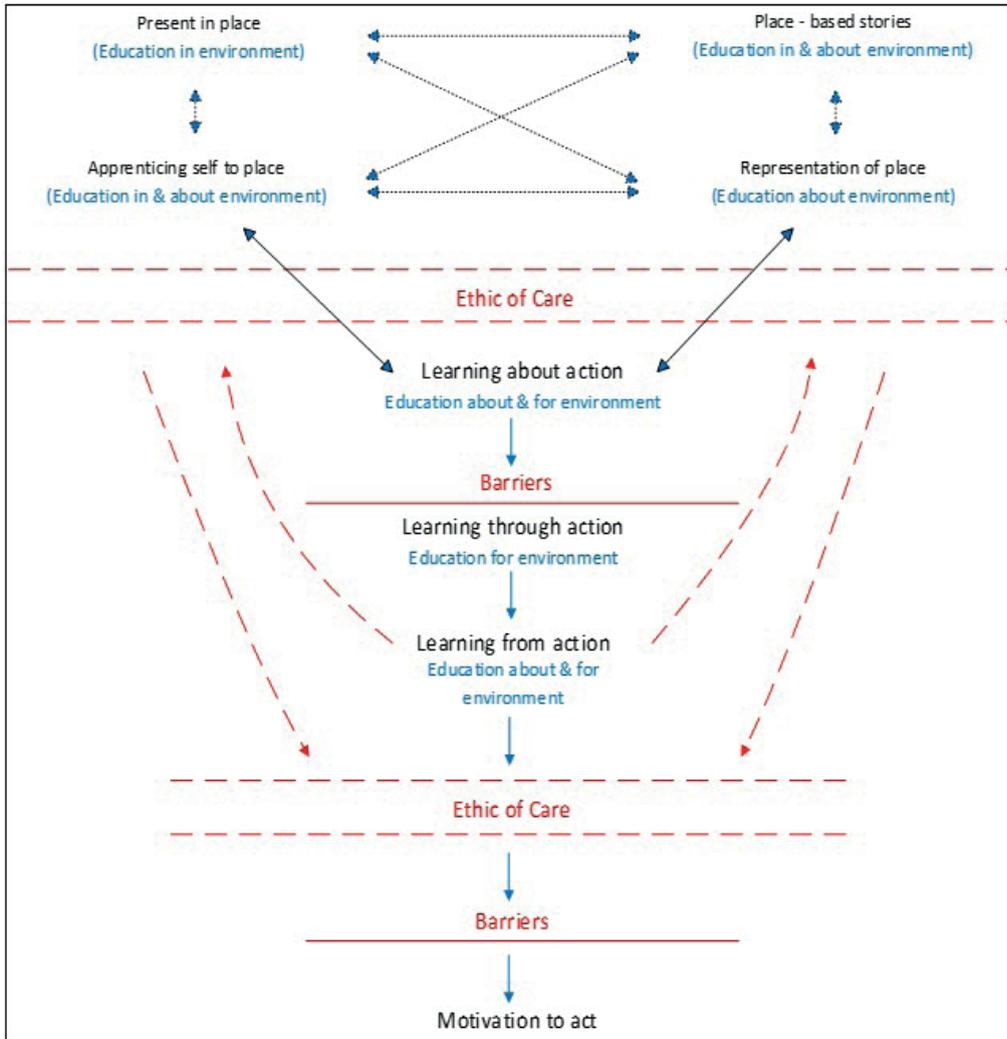


Figure 2. Revised model of intersections between place-responsive outdoor education and environmental action

## CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can tentatively be drawn from the study findings.

The environmental advocacy sessions were designed to give participants the tools to transform an ethic of care into action. The students decided to take action as a group using a voting system to decide exactly what they would undertake. Many of the students disengaged at this point, underlining the findings of Lundholm et al. (2013) that unless people can see the relevance of the action contemplated they will disengage, even if they show an emotional concern about the issue.

Evidence of emotional concern or a developing ethic of care by the study participants was no predictor that they would take action, agreeing with Maxwell-Smith et al., (2016) that concerns for the environment often fail to translate into action due to the subjects' lack of commitment to their beliefs. Those participants who did display a developing action competence made repeat visits to many of the places we passed through and spent more time in the outdoors, agreeing with the idea that multiple visits to a place create a stronger connection with it (Benages-Albert et al., 2015). The study findings also indicate that this stronger connection is a possible predictor of students developing action competence and taking action (Gatersleben et al., 2014).

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- It is important to ensure that subjects develop an action plan that is achievable, at least to some degree; one that they have chosen themselves, and that is measurable in some way. Those involved can then see that they can make a difference.
- Many of the students in the study failed to prioritise planning and taking the action envisaged, or think about how their own behaviours might affect the issue that they cared about. Future research could focus on building resilience so that potential actors have the resources to feel less busy, and thus be able to look beyond themselves, prioritising taking action.
- A longitudinal study designed to investigate how a place-responsive outdoor education journey, combined with environmental advocacy sessions, might affect the prioritising of action, beyond the immediacy of post-journey and advocacy sessions, would be important in order to judge the longer-term impacts of such experiences and attachment to place.

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