Young people’s experiences of and learning in urban woodlands

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Introduction:
It is often argued that children and young people are ‘disconnected’ from nature and suffering a so-called ‘nature-deficit disorder’1. A range of research highlights the benefits of woodland experiences and interventions, such as outdoor learning programmes, are increasingly being implemented2.

In such narratives, the cure is the restorative property of nature itself rather than what is done within nature3. However, ‘nature’ in this sense is often depicted in a nature/culture binary - a pure, untouched, ‘out there’ static site of discovery for humans4, rather than the messy, informal and scruffy realities of, particularly, urban nature. Often neglected is the intersection of everyday and complex experiences of children with all kinds of (urban) nature. Emergent research questions these nature/culture binaries and provides opportunities to consider diverse conceptions of ‘natures’ and forms of encounter5.

Research of diverse encounters with urban woodlands is timely and significant:
- Birmingham as a ‘biophilic’ city - what does this mean to young people?
- Environmental impacts of the Anthropocene demands new ways to consider our relationships with nature
- Research in alternative educations is emergent
- Increasingly diverse urban identities - does intersectionality affect encounter?

Research aims:
This research aims to explore the diverse ways in which young people engage with urban woodlands within UK cities. Through a comparative study of formal Forest School groups and informal independent groups of young people, it aims to highlight entanglements, uses and meanings of urban woodlands (and to stretch ideas of what urban woodlands might consist of). In doing so it is hoped this research may trigger a re-evaluation of (adult) perceptions of young people’s activities in such settings.

Theoretical framework:
This research shall think with non-representational and new materialist theories to consider young people’s relationships with ‘nature’ not as disconnected but as entangled, embodied and relational. That is to say that young people are already-always part of nature, rather than separate. Non-representational work supports this through considering the doing and the emotional or affective.

In thinking with materialities (e.g. trees, animals, mud, sticks, leaves) and more-than-human interactions it becomes possible to witness alternative uses, learning, encounters and knowledge(s) that may be youth-initiated (rather than adult-led). In the embodied and emotional encounters young people may have with(ing) urban woodlands, other alternative educations and ways of knowing may be being cultivated.

Methods:
- Qualitative, ethnographic field-work in UK urban woodlands
- Working with both Forest Schools and informal groups
- Creative methodologies including using video technologies, walk-around interviews, participant observation and creative workshops using materials of the forest
- Working with diverse young people aged 10-14

Impacts:
- Contributions to growing academic debate concerning a) young people’s engagement in urban nature and spaces b) alternative forms of education
- Contribution to new materialist theory application within children’s geographies
- Contributions to learning for Forest Schools practitioners, urban woodland management services, landowners and wider youth and community groups.

References: