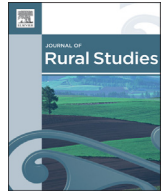




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Unruly children in unbounded spaces: School-based nature experiences for urban learning disabled young people in Greater Manchester, UK

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ABSTRACT

Despite the absence of learning disabled young people from the policy and academic literature, research indicates that they are minority groups amongst countryside visitors and rural leisure seekers (Countryside Agency, 2005; Defra, 2011). It is likely therefore, that disabled children, including learning disabled young people, are particularly marginalised as a result of their intersecting identity as both children and disabled people. A variety of suggestions have been made for the reasons for the absence of disabled people from rural areas and green spaces, particularly focusing on structural issues such as lack of transport and amenities. This paper extends this research by exploring socio-cultural aspects of this absence related to socio-political perception of disability and rurality and its manifestation in school policy. Based on traditional and active interviews and participant observation with young people (aged 11–16) and staff undertaken at a special educational needs secondary school in Greater Manchester, UK, this paper considers the rationale behind institutional organisation of countryside and urban nature visits for learning disabled young people. Whilst benefits of interaction with natural spaces are recognised by staff and pupils, the unregulated and unbounded nature of the countryside proves to emphasise the perceived vulnerability and unruliness of the disabled child. Attempts to mitigate perceived risk result in education and leisure opportunities that are highly structured and supervised, thus impacting on both the quality and quantity of disabled children's countryside access as countryside spaces are reduced to taskscapes, reified as highly managed environments in which activities take place.

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1. Introduction

Children and young people's countryside access, and indeed access to green or 'natural' spaces more broadly, is heavily restricted in contemporary society, and has been a focus of academic and policy interest for a generation (e.g. Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Countryside Agency, 2005; Defra, 2011). This paper intends to explore the ways in which access is provided to

learning disabled children,¹ and the rationale for existing provision, in the context of a specialist UK secondary school,² catering to students who experience mild to moderate learning disability. The paper takes a broad approach to defining the 'countryside', reflecting the experiences of the urban learning disabled young people who participated in the research. When asked about 'rural' and 'countryside' spaces, the young people, and staff, referred to a wide variety of 'green' or 'natural' environments that would not fit a classic definition of a wild, undeveloped, or even agricultural landscape. Rather, the young people talked about places that included urban parks, gardens and wilderness reserves, as well as conservation and education sites such as city farms, zoos and safari parks. For these young people, there was no clear distinction between countryside spaces and other undeveloped, or nature-focused spaces. As such, this paper extends the definition of 'rural' or 'countryside' to best reflect the experiences of the urban, learning disabled, young people who participated in the project. It represents a diversity of interpretation amongst young people,

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¹ The term 'learning disabled' is used consciously throughout this paper to refer to people who experience a cognitive impairment. 'Learning disabled' is a politicised term propagated by the disability rights and academic disability studies movements in the UK. The term conveys that it is society that disables people who have below average intellectual functioning by failure to meet their needs, rather than the impairment itself logically leading a person to be disabled.

² UK secondary schools normally cater to students aged 11–16, or 11–18, depending on whether the school contains its own year 12 and 13 classes.

reflective of their heterogeneous life experiences (Rye, 2006). This broadening of a typical construction of the idea of 'natural', 'rural' or 'countryside' also reflects the developing literature on children's interaction with green space, that increasingly questions the dualism between the natural and the cultural (Taylor, 2011; Kelley et al., 2012; Linzmayer and Halpenny, 2014).

This paper specifically explores the experiences of learning disabled children. By considering both intellectual impairment, and childhood, this paper draws on a variety of approaches and expertise from geographies of disability and health, and geographies of childhood, alongside environmental psychology, policy and geographical engagement with concepts of nature, rurality and landscape. Thus far intellectual disability and childhood disability, and specifically, childhood intellectual disability, have not been key areas of research within the social sciences (see Hall, 2005; Holt, 2010; Goodfellow, 2012; for some fascinating exceptions). However, a focus on intellectually disabled childhoods offers a contribution to the developing discussions concerning intersectionality and marginality occurring within human geography more broadly, and focusing on marginalisation, young people and rurality specifically (e.g. Leyshon, 2008; Matthews et al., 2000). As such, this paper offers a new insight into the experience of youth disability in the context of natural spaces, an area identified by Pini et al. (2016) as understudied by geographers.

The paper begins by exploring relevant literature from across the social sciences, piecing together the current understanding of children's relationship with outdoor spaces, and the specific concerns for learning disabled children's engagement with the countryside. The paper goes on to present and discuss the findings from a research project that directly involved urban learning disabled young people in discussing their experiences and perceptions of rural environments. The paper explores the relationship between the construction of disabled children themselves as 'unruly' and the perception of outdoor green space as similarly unbounded and unmanageable. In turn, the dominant understanding of providing access to green space, for learning disabled young people, is that of a risky endeavour, which needs to be accompanied by high levels of supervision, structure and surveillance. As a result, green spaces are argued to be reduced to taskscapes, environments with the potential to be meaningfully utilised for learning and therapeutic activities, once the inherent dangers are minimised to adults' satisfaction.

2. Geographies of children, nature and risk

Many studies show that there has been an intergenerational decline in children's access to rural and countryside spaces as well as 'natural' environments more broadly (Kahn, 2002; Woolley and Griffin, 2014). This is particularly the case as children's independent travel to and from school diminishes (O'Brien et al., 2000; Hillman et al., 1990), the quality and quantity of accessible green space, including school ground declines, and children experience less time away from adult surveillance (Malone and Tranter, 2003; Pain, 2006). Contemporary restricted access is due, at least in part, to concerns regarding risk; particularly surrounding the threat of strangers and of traffic (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Valentine, 1997). The increased concerns over children's safety are largely considered to be due to changes in society's perception of childhood (Jenks, 1996), and a perceived weakening of social networks, characteristic of neoliberal societies (Furedi, 2002). Parents fear that children are at greater risk in contemporary society due to a lack of surveillance networks, and as a result of media scaremongering (Furedi, 2002; Barnes and Davey, 2009). Meanwhile, desired or acceptable levels of risk appear to be reducing, with even the potential of minimal harm to children increasingly considered

unacceptable within leisure or educational activities (Gill, 2007). As a result, parents, childcare and education providers appear to be searching for increasingly safe spaces in which to occupy children, with indoor spaces seen as manageable, protective and 'known' (Malone, 2007; Talbot, 2013).

The literature shows that people are more likely to consider activities as risky when they are unfamiliar. For example, Kong (2000) and Milligan and Bingley (2007), both argue that young people show fear towards natural environments when they have no prior experience of being in these places. Young people, echo adults, in fearing the unmanageable and unknowable qualities of natural spaces (Little, 2008). Parents have been shown similarly to be afraid of the unseen, and unknown in natural spaces, with high level, but low frequency events such as kidnap and molestation, of particular concern (Slovic, 2000; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Furedi, 2002). This is reflective of wider discourse relating to risk, that shows in general, people fear large, uncertain, uncontrollable risk events, over smaller, more likely occurrences (Beck, 1992, 1999). High levels of management and surveillance are often deemed the most appropriate response to potential risk (Talbot, 2013; Malone, 2007; Gill, 2007). In part, this reflects Beck's (1992) discourse on the individualisation of the responsibility for risk. In other words, society is more likely to blame individuals, or individual organisations for accidents, than it is to accept a broader, social, responsibility.

Geographies of education have followed a Foucauldian approach, arguing that schools mitigate risk by managing children's bodies through surveillance and the threat of punishment for transgression (Pike, 2008, 2010). This sort of management is straightforward in the context of the classroom, and of the school building more broadly. These spaces are designed to limit children's freedom of movement, and to ensure maximum opportunities for surveillance of children by responsible adults. Within school, children are enclosed by walls and doors, increasingly separated from the outside world by locked gates and secure barriers. Leaving the school means relinquishing these structural boundaries, resulting in increased exposure through the removal of physical barriers (von Benzon, 2011). Irvine et al., 2016 refer to a process of 'enclosure' whereby children are forced out of public spaces, particularly 'natural' and outdoor spaces, and increasingly confined indoors, or in well managed, and heavily supervised, small and enclosed, outdoor spaces.

Judgements concerning the permitted movement and spatial access of children, will be made by adults based on their perception of acceptable risk (Gill, 2007). Of course, this calculation is not objective and is dependent on highly subjective valuations concerning what constitutes a reasonable risk. This is likely to include some value judgement about the benefits that will be gained through participation. The way in which benefits are calculated is dependent on individual, institutional, Governmental and wider social values. For example, the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto, a government policy document published in 2006, presents a clear explanation of the benefits of outdoor learning, as perceived by the Department of Skills and Education at this time. The document, which remains the most 'current' publication of its sort, broadly considers the advantages of educational opportunities that take place outside the traditional school building setting. The publication emphasises the importance of direct learning, arguing for a whole range of benefits including developing creativity, learning through play, developing skills and interests in a variety of environments, and central to this paper, providing challenges and opportunities to take acceptable levels of risk (page 2). Schools are also likely to manage children's green space encounters in a way that best meets the institution's aims or, to use the Foucauldian term, rationalities (Pike, 2008; Leyshon and Fish, 2011). Thus,

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