

London Environmental Education Forum (LEEF): Reading Group

Sense of place: how is this encultured in London children?

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Chapter summary

Over fifty per cent of the world's population now live in cities. It is therefore important that environmental educators consider how young people living in urban contexts understand both themselves and their connection to the world. To this end, Adams and colleagues explore *sense of place* and its relationship to urban environmental education. They discuss how the concept's dynamic and complex nature might be a useful lens for educators wanting to understand young people's lived experiences to inform future environmental education programmes.

What is sense of place?

Sense of place is the way we perceive places such as streets, communities, cities and countries. It describes our relationships with places which are expressed through emotions, imagination, stories and personal experiences. It is shaped by our past experiences and the culture and society in which we live. Adams and colleagues note that sense of place includes *place attachment and place meaning*. That is, it reflects both the bonds between people and places and the symbolic meanings people ascribe to places. For those living in cities, a sense of place is impacted by global mobility, migration, and 'blurred boundaries between the natural and built environments' (p.69). In cities, young people's sense of place is constantly shifting as not only is the physical surroundings continually influx, social constructions of race, class and gender vary widely making possible different senses of place among urban residents.

How might urban environmental educators nurture young people's sense of place?

Adams and colleagues highlight the importance of *place-based* approaches to develop young people's sense of place. That is, raising awareness of our place, of our relationship to the place and of how we may contribute positively to it, including the ability to contribute to community well-being. A tall order but extremely important in today's fragile world. To this end the authors set out several strategies:

- 1) Making students more consciously aware of the place they live, through: questions such as, 'what kind of place is this? What does this place mean to you? What does this place enable you to do?' and conceptual mapping, relating to community, transportation, recreation.

- 2) Participatory action research, that raise young people's critical consciousness, can influence how they see themselves in relation to places, and offer opportunities to explore what it means to grow up in a rapidly changing city. Activities might include: collective art marking, restoring local natural areas, or planting a community garden.

Challenges for environmental education

Adams and colleagues note that there is a need for environmental educators to engage with communities over an extended period, so that initiatives take root and collective change might be supported. To build such continuity in the sector, it will be essential that the current prevalence of free-lance and short-term contacts is addressed. Further, the importance of developing educators' own sense of place is highlighted – especially if their formative years were spent outside the city or they have limited knowledge of the local community in which they are working.