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Favorite Places and Relationships with Nature in Children's Drawings from a Forest Kindergarten

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Abstract: This study examines how 5–to 6-year-old children in a forest kindergarten in Japan represented their favorite places through drawings and follow-up conversations. Most children selected outdoor places as their favorites, with 17 of 18 drawings depicting outdoor spaces and 16 of those 17 placing favorite places in natural settings. The findings suggest that children understood favorite spaces not simply as attractive scenery, but through relationships, preferred activities, and everyday participation in a nature-rich environment. Children's drawings also included remembered and imagined elements, suggesting that meaningful experience with place extended beyond the immediate moment. Together, these findings suggest that everyday interaction with the natural world may support children's positive and meaningful relationships with nature in early childhood.

Background

Positive childhood experiences in nature can lead to environmentally responsible behaviors and even environmental careers in adulthood (Chawla & Derr, 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Wells & Lekies, 2006). Early Childhood Environmental Education (ECEE), therefore, emphasizes helping children build meaningful relationships with the natural world (NAAEE, 2016). Yet few studies have examined how this bond forms in early childhood settings (Cumming & Nash, 2015; Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015; Smith, Dunhill, & Scott, 2018), and most focus more on developmental outcomes than on how children themselves understand and represent their relationships with the natural environment (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020).

This study addresses that gap by examining how young children in a forest kindergarten in Japan represented meaningful places in their everyday lives. Focusing on children's favorite-place drawings and follow-up conversations, the study explores how children understood and expressed relationships with place, everyday activity, and the more-than-human world in kindergarten life. In the current study, drawings are treated not simply as transparent reflections of preference, but as representations whose meanings emerge through children's own explanations and everyday contexts.

Research questions

1. How do young children represent their favorite places in a forest kindergarten through drawings and follow-up conversations?
2. What do these representations suggest about how children develop meaningful relationships with place and the natural world in everyday kindergarten life?

Methods

Participants and setting.

Eighteen children ages 5–6 participated in this study at a forest kindergarten in Japan. The site features forested hills, a creek, horse spaces, and other indoor and outdoor learning environments that children encounter in daily life.

Data collection

Children were invited to draw their favorite place in the kindergarten with crayons and watercolors. After drawing, the researcher conducted short individual follow-up conversations, often with an early childhood teacher present, asking children what they had drawn, what happened there, why the place mattered to them, and how they imagined the kindergarten would change if that place, animal, or feature were no longer there. These conversations supported the interpretation of the drawings and clarified the children's intended meanings.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, drawings were descriptively reviewed for place type and recurring environmental features such as animals, plants, buildings, paths, and weather. Second, children's spoken

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explanations were analyzed interpretively to examine how favorite places were understood through activity, participation, affordances, and relationships with humans and more-than-human beings. Teacher comments were used only when needed to clarify children's intended meanings.

Findings

Most children selected outdoor places as their favorites: 17 of 18 drawings depicted outdoor spaces, and 16 of those 17 placed favorite places in natural settings.

Favorite places were often understood through relationships.

Children often described favorite places through relationships with animals, peers, and other features of everyday kindergarten life rather than through scenery alone. For some, favorite places were tied to horses and horse duty; for others, they were connected to playing with friends or being in shared spaces. Together, these accounts suggest that children often understood favorite places through relationships formed in everyday kindergarten life.

Favorite places were often linked to favorite activities.

Children frequently described favorite places through activities they enjoyed, rather than through appearance alone. Favorite places were associated with catching insects, feeding horses, swimming, moving through everyday spaces, and playing with others. These accounts suggest that children often understood favorite places as places where they could do what they most enjoyed.

Children's drawings can go beyond immediate reality.

Children's explanations showed that drawings were not simply literal copies of the environment. Many included remembered or imagined elements, for example, flowers blooming in Spring, activities done in other seasons, suggesting that meaningful experiences with place were carried forward in children's memory and imagination.

Discussion

These findings suggest that, in a forest kindergarten, children's favorite places were meaningful not simply because they were natural or visually appealing, but because they were tied to relationships, preferred activities, and everyday participation. For some children, favorite places were closely associated with horses, insects, feeding, or other activities that involved direct engagement with the natural world. Even when children emphasized activities not explicitly centered on nature, those experiences were still situated within the kindergarten's everyday natural environment, where forests, animals, weather, and outdoor spaces were part of daily life. This suggests that the natural environment may become part of how children remember and value those experiences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that educational approaches emphasizing everyday interaction with the natural world may be generative for early childhood environmental education. When relationships are formed not only through explicitly nature-focused activities, but also through repeated participation in play, care, movement, and shared routines, positive relationships with place and the natural world may be more likely to emerge through everyday experience. From this perspective, the importance of the forest kindergarten lies less in outdoor exposure alone than in its setting, the integration of nature into the ordinary rhythms of children's daily lives.

Children's drawings and explanations also suggest that these experiences were not confined to the immediate moment. Many children depicted elements they had remembered from several months ago or elements they imagined, indicating that meaningful experiences with places, animals, and activities were carried forward in memory and imagination. Although this study does not demonstrate how long such impressions endure, it suggests that everyday experiences in a forest kindergarten may foster meaningful, potentially lasting relationships with the natural world emphasized in ECEE.

Finally, this study highlights the value of combining children's drawings with brief follow-up conversations. Rather than treating drawings as self-evident reflections of preference, this approach enabled a better understanding of how young children express meaningful relationships with place through everyday kindergarten life.

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