Engaging with the residues of time: Palimpsest as a metaphor

Bronwen Cowie[1]
Emily Nelson[2]
[1] University of Waikato
[2] Eastern Institute of Technology

In this paper we employ the notion of a palimpsest to identify the potential of student exploration of an outdoor space that has been developed but still retains elements of 'wildness' and of its past uses. Conceptualised as a palimpsest the landscape consists of "superimposed layers of geography, history, culture and politics" (Marvel & Simm, 2016, p. 125). Traces of past activities and objects along with more recent additions provide "layers of meaning that are waiting to be revealed, interpreted and understood by those who encounter them" (p. 126). In the paper we document primary students' responses and reactions to different elements in the outdoor learning space as they encountered it multiple times over the course of a school year. Data was generated via photovoice (participant-generated photography coupled with photo elicitation interviews). Our thematic analysis indicated that what captured student attention in the moment and over time was not necessarily what was prominent in the space, nor what was expected by us as researchers. What captured individual student attention for investigation was not fixed and varied widely. For some students it was the steps, sculptures and dead stumps in the space that captured their interest. Others were captivated by the ambiguous and obscure such as holes, aglae and broken bricks. The ambiguity seemed to prompt students to explore and pose questions related to origins, use and connections. Comments from some students suggested their exploration of the palimpsestic nature of the space evoked an emotional, even spiritual, engagement.

Our analysis found that students did not distinguish between past and more recent materials, or native and exotic flora and fauna, in a normative way. Glimpses of the past were accessible in the present, central to students' appreciation of the space as special'. We argue that within a multifaceted landscape, the outworking of past activities through artefacts, can act as time capsules of curriculum possibilities. Untangling the palimpsestic nature of a space contributes to better appreciating its possibilities for learning, curriculum and community.

Marvell, A., & Simm, D. (2016). Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork. *Geography, 101*(3), 125-136.