

**Teacher Special Issue****Exploring the interactions between children's sense of self and their sense of place through sport**

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**Abstract**

Identity formation, the development of a unique 'sense of self' is an ongoing process which begins in late childhood. This is a highly personal process which takes place within the context of an individual's personal geographies and is informed by an individual's experiences within, and understanding of, place: their 'sense of place'. This article will explore and highlight the importance of sporting locations (e.g., sports clubs, stadia) in the formation of children's identities. Children who regularly participate in co-curricular sporting activities commit a significant amount of their time each week to training and competing. Consequently, sport and sporting locations are often noteworthy influences in children's lives. Findings draw on research conducted between 2016 and 2017 at four sports clubs in Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, Hertfordshire: Welwyn Garden Swimming Club, Herts Phoenix Athletic Club, Welwyn Pegasus Football Club with children aged 7 – 14 years.

**1. Introduction**

Identity formation, the development of an individual's 'sense of self', occurs as they make a series of decisions regarding their 'association' or 'disassociation' with (i.e., acceptance or rejection of) certain 'identity markers' e.g., gender, race, culture, interests, hobbies, relationships (Raburu, 2015; Konstantoni, Kustatscher and Emejulu, 2017). These decisions are made within the context of an individual's personal geographies: their understandings of, relationships with, and experiences within, the places that they encounter.

The abstruse and changeable nature of identity means that few individuals ever achieve an 'absolute' identity. Throughout an individual's life their associations and dissociations with identity markers will change. Moreover, there is broad consensus among identity theorists that identity is a performance; individuals will adapt the way that they present themselves and behave depending on their environment (Goffman, 1959; Cited: Pearson, 2009). However, 'identity exploration', activity with the purpose of assisting one's identity formation, begins in late childhood (Schachter and Venutura, 2008); a time when children will be experiencing greater socioemotional- and physical-independence from their parents or guardians.

This article is situated within two geographic subdisciplines: Children's geographies (see, for example: Horton and Kraftl, 2005; Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and geographies of sport (see, for example: Bale, 2000; Bale, 2003; Bale and Dejonghe, 2008). Children's geography emerged as an independent subdiscipline during the 1980s in response to Human Geography's lack of attention to childhood experiences. It recognises that children are capable social actors who merit specific research and have a right to represent themselves within both academic and political debates (Holloway and

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Valentine, 2000; Evans, 2008). Children's geography pays particular attention to children's everyday 'spatialities' (encounters with space and place) and considers children's role in shaping spaces' meaning.

Children's geographies research has been critiqued for placing children in a marginal position since their accounts are channelled through adult understandings (Christensen, Mygind and Bentsen, 2015). In consideration of this critique, research was conducted with an appreciation of the importance of reflecting on how my own desire to encourage children's participation in research during data collection, power relations between myself and participants, and my own existing knowledge may have impacted data collection and subsequent analysis.

Geographies of sport focus on the spatial and landscape characteristics of sports and the meanings and values society ascribes to sports locations, e.g., stadia, which over time absorb, and come to reflect, contemporary attitudes, e.g., towards race, gender and class (DeChano and Shelley, 2004). This provides an introduction to the likely experiences of individuals within, and their relationships with, sporting locations. Contrary to children's geographers, geographers of sport have been critiqued for their attention to the identification and analysis of 'macro' processes, e.g., temporal and spatial variations in sports club's location, international sporting events and the role of sports in shaping cultural landscapes. This often comes at the expense of considerations of the individual's relationship with sport and the way in which sport influences, as well as is influenced by, individual's daily lives (Allender, Cowbum and Foster, 2006).

Nevertheless, geographies of sport do acknowledge the role of place in impacting individual's daily experiences which in turn shape their identity. As yet, there have been limited studies which incorporate the work of academics specialising in both children's geography and geographies of sport.

**2. The study context**

My research considered the role of sports participation in the geographies of children's identity formation. To recruit participants I contacted the committees of 12 sports clubs based in Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield (Hertfordshire) requesting that a communication was forwarded to all members offering the opportunity for voluntary, individual participation. Four clubs responded positively, two declined and six did not respond. This approach empowered gatekeepers (i.e., committee members) to control access to potential participants which can either facilitate or hinder recruitment (Bedford and Burges, 2001; Conradson, 2005). Recruiting sports clubs' members was a purposive sampling method; it ensured all data collected would be applicable to the research issue (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig, 2007). However, this does mean that data is not representative of all children.

Between June 2016 and July 2017 I conducted research at Welwyn Garden Swimming Club, Herts Phoenix Athletic Club, Welwyn Pegasus Football Club and Welwyn Rugby Football Club. Seven small groups of children aged 7 – 14 years participated in a one-off,

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informal, discussion-based session. This lasted approximately one hour and took place either before or after training.

Prior to research's commencement, ethical approval was sought from, and granted by The University of Birmingham Ethics Committee. All clubs were provided with details of my enhanced DBS certificate, and I ensured full compliance with Child Protection Legislation. Participants and their parents / guardians were provided an information sheet outlining the nature and purpose of research and were required to sign a consent form. The information sheet assured anonymity and confidentiality and detailed participants' right to withdraw without prejudice or reason at any time (pleasingly, no participants withdrew). I ascribed pseudonyms to each of the participants and stored all data in password protected folders.

Moreover, I reflected on, and sought to limit the extent to which, my own experiences and biases impacted research. I have spent, and continue to spend, innumerable hours participating and competing in sporting activities and many of my formative experiences took place in a sporting environment. Moreover, I was a member of Welwyn Garden Swimming Club for 16 years. Although differences in age meant that I was unfamiliar with the individuals from Welwyn Garden Swimming Club who participated in research. Sessions had three parts and aimed to address the following key issues:

1. The importance of a sporting association in children's identity formation.
2. The importance of place in children's identity formation.
3. The interaction between children's sporting association and place that impacts children's identity formation.

First, children marked places of significance to them on a map of the local area (Figure 1). This activity enabled a facilitated discussion, about why children chose specific places, where they felt best able to express their identity, and whether – and why – children acted differently according to where they were. The term 'identity' proved difficult to conceptualise for many children, therefore I used 'what you think makes you as a person' as a simplification.

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Figure 1 .Madison's map with places of significance in the local area identified.

Second, we explored how identity is constructed of many different aspects, how children perform their identity and how this can be constrained, for example, by time. Children divided two circles into 'pie-charts': one circle represented children's identity where the size of section for each 'identity marker' – a term I used to signify the myriad of aspects that constitute an individual's identity, e.g., gender, race, culture, interests, hobbies, relationships – was proportionate to its importance. Children had autonomy over the number of, and names of, the identity markers that they included. The second

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circle was divided according to how children spend their time during a typical week (Figure 2).

Finally, we focussed on the importance of sport. Children discussed why they participated in sport, if and how they felt they benefited from participating in sport, and how their sporting identity impacted the way that they perceived places in their local area.

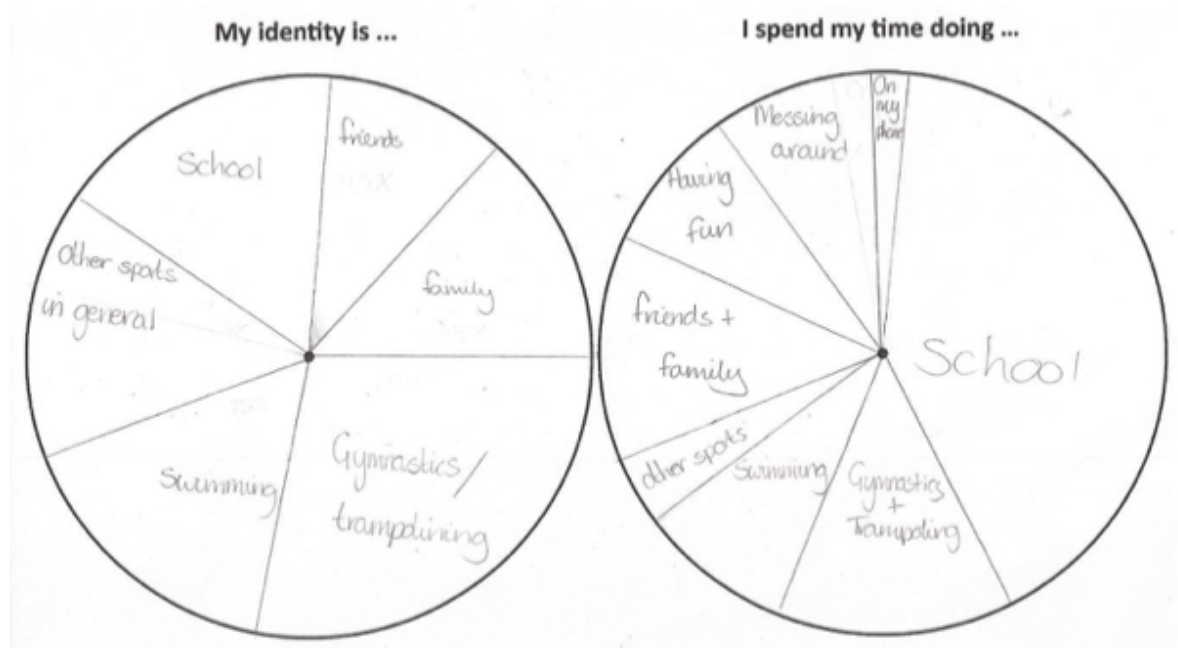


Figure 2. Mia's time and identity pie charts

### 3. Results

My research found that:

- Children's identity formation is impacted by their sporting association, and,
- Sports locations (e.g., training sites) play a role in facilitating children's exploration or performance of their identity.

Children's positive identity- and place- attachment to sports locations were linked to two factors: time and enjoyment.

#### Time

Time, i.e., ongoing membership of sports clubs, provided children with consistent relationships with adult volunteers who watched them grow-up and friendships which were unchanged and supportive in times of uncertainty, e.g., when moving school.

"I've been here for quite a while and just kind of like grown up mostly so it just feels nice when people know you for a long time" (Chloe, 14 years).

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“And all the coaches when they’ve seen you when you were younger and they know you now it’s nice because then they know how you’ve changed and can see who you really are” (Avery, 14).

This continuity and familiarity empowered children to drop any pretences that they embodied in other locations, e.g., school, and freely express their true identity.

“I think my friends from sport see a different side of me like in sport I’m a bit not caring too much what I look like because I know I’m just going to come out red and sweaty anyway but in school or to the other girls at school it’s not really an excuse to not be 100% perfect all the time” (Mia, 13 years).

“School is a lot smaller on my identity [than time pie chart] because I think going to school doesn’t really make me because I have to go to school anyway” (Emma, 12 years).

This finding supports the work of Horton and Kraftl (2014) which argues that the longer children spend, and ‘perform’ within a given place, the greater the likelihood that they will develop a positive attachment to that place. The one notable exception was school, children commented that the amount of time that they spent in school was “half my time and life” (Isaac, 9 years) and “most of my life” (Kaylee, 11 years) but they did not feel a positive place attachment to school, nor did they feel that school impacted their identity significantly.

**Enjoyment**

Children particularly enjoyed spending time in sporting locations due to a perceived freedom and lack of judgement which they often contrasted with their experience at school. This is perhaps surprising given the highly structured nature of training sessions, and competitiveness and judgement (e.g., team selection) inherent in sports’ participation.

Children recognised that they expressed their identity differently depending on where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing. For instance, Dylan (13 years) noted “If I was at school in a classroom I’m gonna show a much more behaved version of myself than on a tennis court playing tennis or a football pitch with one of my friends”. Many children felt it was a positive that they could employ different identity markers according to their context: “I like that I’m different [in different places] because I show people different sides of me, and I can express my feelings in different ways” (Jacob, 10 years). Nevertheless, many children identified one place where they felt best able to express their identity. For most children – including Layla, Jacob and Alfie – this was either their home or where they participated in sports.

“I would say the rugby club because I can just express my feelings and like not get judged for it” (Layla, 12 years).

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“Football ‘cos you can be serious, you can laugh, you can be cross, you can be happy” (Jacob, 10 years).

“HERE!!” [Welwyn Pegasus’ Football Club’s training ground] (Alfie, 7 years).

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) explored how positive place attachment enabled identity development by affording individuals the opportunity to test different identity markers in that place. Discussions highlighted the way in which sports clubs enabled a coming together of children’s multiple identity associations including friends, enjoyment, confidence, fitness and individuality, as well as sport.

It is essential that children recognise that our understandings of place are subjective and personal constructs. During discussion children did demonstrate an implicit understanding of the idea that our behaviour within different places is conditioned by exogenous factors, i.e., taught behaviours and societal expectations.

“I’m normally at different places for different reasons. If I’m at London we’ll probably watch West End shows which I really enjoy and I’ll probably like act differently because I know it’s more special ... with sport practices I’m a bit more friendly but like if it’s a competition I’ll be really like competitive” (Sophia, 11 years).

“If I was at school in a classroom I’m gonna show a much more behaved version of myself than on a tennis court playing tennis or a football pitch with one of my friends” (Dylan, 13 years).

Places are never ‘neutral locations’, all encounters within them are partial, subjective and impacted by wider processes of social structure and control. These dynamics influence our daily lives on a range of scales, from our personal geographies to the geographies of globalisation. Exploring children’s own constructions of place – how and why they identify with certain locations – was an effective way to introduce children to these complex ideas. The activities and subsequent discussion provided even the youngest of participants an opportunity for personal reflection on their own relationship with place and identity.

**4. Conclusions**

There is no suggestion that a sporting association is either the sole or most important association in children’s identity formation. This research’s findings align with, and add to, the existing body of knowledge which recognises identity to be a highly personal and complex interaction between individuals’ associations and disassociations in order to establish a unique ‘sense of self’ which is adapted and performed according to an individual’s environment. Furthermore, research brings a geographic understanding to the role of children’s sporting association in their identity formation by synthesis of two, previously distinct, geographic subdisciplines. Findings are beneficial to identity theorists working within an intersectional framework as they provide a detailed account of the role of one identity association (sport) in children’s identity formation.

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Additionally, the activities provided children with an opportunity to begin to explore how exogenous factors, i.e., their co-curricular activities and their sense of place shape their sense of self, and how and why they may perceive themselves and the world, different to others. Future work could consider the interactions between children's sense of self and their sense of place through other activities, for example creative and expressive arts such as art, dance, music, and drama.

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