Landscapes for Early Childhood

Investigating the characteristics of good outdoor environments for young children in early childhood programmes

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- What the work is seeking to do
- Introduce some of the findings regarding significant characteristics of a good outdoor environment for young children's well-being, development and learning.
- Indicate next steps

Overview of the context for the work

- New ECE framework in England (EYFS): **'enabling environments'** as one of 4 fundamental guiding principles.
- Unprecedented focus on improving quality regarding implementation of the new framework in England, with very strong **emphasis on outdoor environments.**
- Urgent need for the application of research evidence to create effective **pedagogical outdoor environments** to meet programme aspirations (research showing only high quality provision is effective).
- Very little research information has been **captured and made available** to those developing programmes in the UK.

What the work is seeking to do

- Capture and draw together **relevant research contributions** in the fields of Early Childhood; Landscape Architecture; Playwork; Body & Movement Studies (including sensory processing); Children's Geographies; Environmental Psychology and Evolutionary Biology.
- **Make available** useful research information to those developing outdoor environments for ECE.
- Develop **deeper understandings** about the characteristics of good outdoor environments for young children in early childhood programmes.
- Create dialogue and the **sharing of perspectives** between educators and landscape professionals.

Theoretical frameworks

- **Experience of place** (Hart 1979); What is it like to be in this place? (Clark & Moss 2006). Children inhabit the space.

- **Role of environment in pedagogy**
  Environment has strong influence on feelings behaviour/action and experience (Prescott 2008)
  Environment is a critical pedagogical element - 'third teacher' (Ceppi & Zini 1998).

- **Children's habitats - ecological model**
  Children both read and act upon their environment: child is modified by each action and interaction environment is modified by how children interact with it.
  Niche: optimum micro-environment.

Our research focus

- What do young children want and need to do?
- What features and characteristics afford this?
- What messages do environmental features and characteristics send to young children?

Findings: characteristics of a good outdoor environment for early childhood

- Several very interesting and apparently significant characteristics/ concepts emerging
- Each characteristic-concept is an iceberg
- Many of these characteristics inter-connect and interact with each other.
- By connecting and comparing treatment of parallel concepts, can deepen understanding from having different perspectives and contexts.

Softness: comfort and responsiveness

Prescott (2008)

Refuge - seclusion

Appleton (1975)

Reverie

McMillan (1930)

Variety, complexity, change, chance

(Shaw 1987); (Striniste & Moore 1989)

Loose parts & Open Materials

Nicholson (1971); Prescott (2008)

Affordance

Heft (1988); Kytta (2006)

Flexibility, plasticity, responsiveness

(Kirkby 1989); (Brown 2003)

Predictability & readability

Olds (1987);
Herrington & Lesmeister (2006)

Sense of Place

Hart (1979); Shaw (1987)

Pathways

Shaw (1987); Hayward (1998)

Boundaries

Athey (1990);
Herrington & Lesmeister (2006)

Landform & movement

Fjortoft (2004); Jabadao (2005)

Prospect

Appleton (1975); Shaw (1987)

Vegetation Lester & Maudsley (2006); Parsons (2007)

Implications

➢ Proposing a shift in thinking:

- away from the ‘playground’ and ‘outdoor playspace’ paradigms
- towards a notion of children’s ‘gardens’
- that aim to meet psychological (emotional and cognitive) and bodily needs to create effective pedagogical outdoor environments for well-being, play and development.

Implications

Proposing a shift in thinking:

- ➢ away from the structured design paradigm towards **semi-structured** environments (Haas 1996)
- towards planning for **flexibility** and increasingly flexible use
- ➢ extending the ‘enabling environment’ discourse towards **empowering** and potentiating environments
- to create effective pedagogical outdoor environments that pursue **agency**

Next Steps

Reality is:

Academic literature

- Much research is 20+ years old
- Much research is about middle childhood
- Need for research in context of early childhood programmes

Policy situation in UK

- Nearly all 3-4 year-olds in nursery and very many babies & toddlers in daycare: we know how much quality matters!
- Provision for 2 year-olds in disadvantaged situations: assumption that it is good for them
- ‘Intervention’ discourse and drive to ‘close the gap’ in outcomes for children

Questions:

- What other knowledge and understanding already exists, where is it (different disciplines)?
- What is currently being researched?
- What research needs to be done?
  What is urgent?
- Would an international cross-disciplinary network help to bring this together?

Questions:

- How can we make findings and new understandings accessible enough to those people (early childhood educators and landscape professionals) developing provision for young children, so that they *do actually make use of them*?

Next steps

- Raising the significance of particular characteristics for the design and development of early childhood environments: design guidance for professionals
- Creating dialogue and sharing of perspectives and languages between educators and landscape professionals: Landscapes for Early Childhood network (UK)
- Seeking empirical material

- observational film material (Siren Films)
- what do young children take photographs of?
- more practical collaboration between educators and landscape architects (e.g. PlayGarden)