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Changing Landscapes Changing Children's Lives

Why developing your outdoor area and your outdoor practice is more important than ever.

I first came across Learning through Landscapes some 15 years ago through a report written by Wendy Titman "Special Places, Special People" (ref 1). This research opened my eyes to the fact that even very young children 'read' their external environment, and what they read affects their own internal landscape, including their concept of self, and therefore every other area of their learning and development.

For children to be well and to find their way in current times, they need opportunities to take risks, to run, leap, shout and be messy, in a way rarely possible indoors. In an increasingly 'virtual' world they also need to explore with their senses the physical elements of the environment. They need opportunities to observe and experience first hand some of the amazing natural features of the planet on which they depend for survival. Space and time for outdoor learning in the early years can help children discover who they are and make sense of the world.

Reading our environment

We all pick up messages from the external environment. The shape and use of public space is often a clear indicator of the values of the society or community – for example the comparative value of children, houses, cars, privacy etc. Children who are given a small area of concrete to play in with a high fence which cuts them off from the community, may 'read' that they are not welcome or not safe.

An ecological view of child development

Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development (ref. 2) teaches us that we cannot separate the children from the context of their immediate environment and beyond that the wider community and the world. There is a constant interaction between the child and the widening 'systems' of his or her environment - each affecting the other to varying degrees from the earliest days of life.

In Victorian times, in the early years of industry, the key paediatric concerns were child poverty, child labour and high rates of infant mortality. Over one hundred years on, infant mortality for children under 4 is now rare in the UK, mainly due to improvements in environmental factors such as housing and sanitation. Now there are increasing concerns about the rise of new morbidities such as speech and language disorders, behavioural and attention deficits and childhood obesity. It cannot be coincidence that the rise in these health issues, runs parallel to rapid environmental changes over recent years, in a new age of technology.



The environment and the age of technology

My father, a former science correspondent for the Observer newspaper, died in 1984. If he were to reappear today as a time travelling reporter the first thing he might notice is the huge increase in road traffic. He would also notice that the people were often apparently talking to themselves - or into little hand-held mouth pieces. He might also notice that babies are rarely transported in prams - but in light weight buggies facing away from their parents and into the onslaught of oncoming people, noise and traffic.

He would see far fewer children out and about in the parks, woods, playgrounds and streets, but even indoors, he would not likely find them in the kitchen in or the living room - but closeted in their bedrooms communicating 'virtually' with their school mates through Facebook or being entertained by any number of computer games, video or TV opportunities.

He would notice children and adults leading more sedentary lives - eyes glued to screens and ears glued to mobile devices. He would see parents so distracted with information overload and emails and phones demanding more instant replies, that they much less time communicating with their young children.

As a scientist, my father would have thrilled at the possibilities of new technology and the internet to push the boundaries of our learning, to enable us to reach out across the world without ever having to take an aeroplane. He would also be amazed that all this technology has not freed up people's time for more play and leisure or for access to the great outdoors which he loved.

Supporting outdoor pedagogy in the early years – learning from others

So how can early years' practitioners respond to our rapidly changing world? More importantly, how can we support children to find their place and confidently engage with the world around them? Can high quality outdoor learning experiences be an antidote or have therapeutic effects for today's key health concerns?

The UK has proud tradition of outdoor early years pedagogy and practice from Margaret Macmillan (1860 - 1931) and Susan Isaacs (1885–1948) through to more recent interest and development in English, Welsh and Scottish curricula and the expansion of Forest Schools. There is a growing body of research that shows that young children's access to nature and outdoor play is positively associated with improved self esteem, physical health, development of language skills and dispositions to learning. For most experienced early years teachers and practitioners, this research simply confirms what we already know: the outdoor environment offers children important opportunities rarely found indoors, including the space and freedom from background noise to really tune in to themselves, to watch, listen and touch the living landscape which is always changing around them.

A long way to go

But we have a long way to go in this country to ensure that **all** children are able to have these vital experiences, on a daily basis. Richard Louv in his book "Last child in the woods" (ref 4) suggests that today's children are acquiring 'nature deficit disorders' caused by diminishing opportunities to play outside. It is also true that some children are more likely to be deprived of these essential experiences than others.



Making the most of current opportunities

The English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) makes strong statements such as "Outdoor learning has equal value to indoor learning" and "Children need the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning". Along with early years curricula in across the UK, Europe, Scandinavia, New Zealand and Australia, there is strong recognition of the importance of outdoor play for all round healthy early childhood development.



The EYFS states: “An approach to outdoor learning that considers experiences rather than equipment places children at the centre or the provision being made” and we need to ensure that capital funding does not simply feed the commercial equipment catalogues. There are so many ways of exploring outdoors and supporting children to make those essential connections with the environment, to learning to treasure the earth as a source of all things that keep us alive, such as food, clothing and shelter.

Rachel Carson says "If a child is to keep his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him (or her) the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in"

Early Year practitioners, working alongside parents and their wider community, can be those companions. We are in a privileged position of being alongside children as they discover that joy, excitement and mystery. We can support, watch, teach and wonder as they discover confidence in, and mastery of their limbs, their sense of balance, their use of tools. We can ask ‘alongside questions’ through which we share and sustain their lines of thinking and enquiry about how things work and where things come from. Be experiencing with them the sound of birdsong, the beauty of a sunset or a rainbow, the taste of rain, the feel of the power of the wind, the deliciousness of freshly picked blackberries, we can help them develop their a sense of their own place on this Earth, and perhaps discover it anew for ourselves.

The early years sector need to be advocates for children, and work with parents, professionals and the wider community to plan, reflect and develop places for real, enriching, intellectually and physically stimulating places for children to be outdoors. I am proud to be working with Learning through Landscapes, which is an organisation that supports schools and settings to do just that.

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Learning through Landscapes is a registered charity which promotes the value of outdoor learning and supports the development of school grounds and early years settings. www.ltl.org.uk

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