

Young children's perspectives of outdoor learning spaces: What matters?

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OUTDOOR SPACES ARE A FEATURE of most Australian early learning settings and have potential for many learning opportunities. This article reports on a study that investigated three- and four-year-old children's perspectives of the outdoor environment in their early childhood education setting. The research was conducted using multi-method approaches including child-led tours and photography, photographic elicitation and conversations. Findings emphasise the importance for children of being able to pretend, move, observe and be social. These findings have implications for designers of both curriculum and outdoor spaces for young children.

When discussing the 'space' of educational settings there is a temptation to think in terms of *indoor* spaces, of the buildings and their contents. However, outdoor spaces are also part of educational environments, and research indicates that experiences outside not only improve academic performance, but also physical activity levels, social interactions and emotional wellbeing (Malone, 2008; Nicol, Higgins, Ross, & Mannion, 2007; Rickinson et al., 2004; Waite, 2011). But as Malone (2008) notes, much research focuses on school-aged children and there have been few investigations of outdoor spaces for younger children in settings such as kindergartens and child care, particularly in Australian contexts.

Despite a lack of research, the Australian Government has made a clear statement of the role of outdoor spaces in its nationally mandated document, *Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009) for all young children (birth to five) who attend early childhood educational settings. It states: 'Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors' (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 15–16). Given this statement, researching outdoor spaces in educational settings for young children is a pressing need in Australia, and as children are the main users of such spaces, their perspectives are a logical starting point

for the research effort. However, research including young children's perspectives is uncommon, not just with respect to the outdoors, but in general (Clark, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Smith, 2011). Therefore, the goals of this study were not only to investigate children's perspectives of the outdoor spaces in their early learning setting, but also to investigate methods for doing this. Findings relating to the children's perspectives are the focus of this article; research methods findings are described elsewhere (Merewether & Fleet, 2014).

Valuing children's perspectives

Smith (2011) points out that the world abounds with research *on* children, but the body of research *with* children that has found ways to make children's voices visible is limited, although this has been changing over the last two decades. A significant catalyst is the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989), which recognises children as active citizens with rights to participate in matters affecting them, including research. A second contributor to changing perspectives is the field of Childhood Studies (James & James, 2008; Kehily, 2009; Qvortrup, Corsaro & Honig, 2009), which focuses on children's rights, voices and participation. By conceptualising children as social actors and capable holders of opinions and ideas, Childhood Studies presents

the possibility for researchers to work together with children as co-constructors of research data. A third major contributor to strengths-based views of young children is the educational project of the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy which, through its use of multiple forms of listening and documentation, has graphically made visible the capabilities of young children (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Giudici, Rinaldi & Krechevsky, 2001; Rinaldi, 2006).

These catalysts influenced the work of Clark and Moss (2001) who coined the term 'Mosaic approach' as a metaphor for their multi-method, participatory research approach which draws together pieces from different sources to create a 'picture' of children's perspectives. The approach uses the traditional research tools of observation and interviews, as well as a variety of participatory tools that can be used by children. The participatory tools include child-led photography, book making, tours and drawing. The Mosaic approach has informed researchers who have found ways to engage and empower young children in research (Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Fleet & Britt, 2011; Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2005; Stephenson, 2009). This work has revealed young children to be capable of providing valuable perspectives in matters of importance to them.

The present study took inspiration from the Mosaic approach to seek young children's perspectives about their early childhood setting's outdoor environment with a view to joint decision making about its future design and use. The inquiry was guided by the question: *What does it mean to be in this outdoor space?* The research used case study methodology (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), as the primary intention was to gain in-depth perspectives from children in one particular context. While single-case studies do not lend themselves to generalising (Stake, 1995), insights gained from this study may be relevant for others.

Children's preference for the outdoors

Studies that have investigated children's environments consistently find children prefer the outdoors. For example, research with school-aged children in England (Burke, 2005; Titman, 1994) and younger children in Canada and New Zealand (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011; Stephenson, 2002) note children's preferences for outdoor over indoor spaces in educational settings. Stephenson (2002) postulates that children preferred the outdoor environment in the case she studied as it was more 'open' in terms of space, educator attitudes, routines and equipment, and Titman's (1994, p. 27) study of school-aged children led her to conclude the outdoors 'signified opportunities for a range of the things children wanted and needed to do which were not possible indoors'. Rogers and Evans (2007, p. 164), in a study of young children's role-play, note outdoor contexts enable children to 'exercise greater choice over materials, location and playmates'. Australian studies involving school children have investigated children's preferences

for certain outdoor equipment and materials (Bundy et al., 2008; Lucas & Dymont, 2010) and similar constructs have been investigated for younger children in the United States (Cosco, Moore & Islam, 2010; Holmes & Procaccino, 2009) and Norway (Storli & Hagen, 2010). These studies suggest that if outdoor environments are to appeal to children, equipment and materials must be open-ended, and facilitate challenge and social engagement.

It is important to acknowledge that while research suggests the outdoors is popular with most children, a few prefer the indoors (Einarsdottir, 2011). Perhaps outdoor time is not as relevant for some children due to increased opportunities indoors (Waller, Sandseter, Wyver, Årlemalm-Hagsér & Maynard, 2010). Agency, choice and opportunities to socialise appear to be central to children's preference for outside spaces, but these elements are not necessarily unique to the outdoors. When some Australian school children were asked to recall a special place in their kindergarten, the outdoors featured in their memories; however, their choices were not so much grounded in 'outdooriness', but in the opportunity to have 'creative agency and relationships' (Fleet & Britt, 2011, p. 159). The mere fact of being outside, or the amount of physical space available, does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes. Some outdoor play environments with large amounts of space but a lack of equipment and materials lead to an increase in school-aged children's boredom and aggression, along with lower levels of social, physical and cognitive development (Evans, 2001; Moore & Wong, 1997). Little (2010) suggests that in some Australian early childhood settings, in an attempt to remove risk, 'outdoor play experiences have become so sterile that the thrill and exhilaration that provide a perception of risk have also been removed' (p. 16). These 'risk-free' outdoor environments are unlikely to be favoured by children.

Methods

The following is an overview of the methods used in this study. Methods are more fully described in Merewether and Fleet (2014). The research took place over two months in a Perth early childhood learning setting. Within this centre, two classes of three- and four-year-old children, each welcoming 25 children, and each with a university-qualified early childhood lead educator, participated in the study. These two classes shared one outdoor space. In consultation with the educators and children, eight children—four boys and four girls—were chosen as key informants. This subset consisted of five three-year-olds and three four-year-olds; three were from homes where a language other than English was spoken. For the research to proceed, it was also important to select children who demonstrated willingness to articulate or draw their points of view. Before commencing the study, ethical approval was granted by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. In accordance with this approval,

pseudonyms are used in this article and photos do not reveal children's identity.

Data generation involved observations, along with child-led photography, conversations and drawing. The research activities in this study were designed to be part of the everyday pedagogical activities in the classroom and were grounded in a desire to: a) avoid undue intrusion; b) be non-confrontational and participatory; and c) encourage children to be a part of the interpretation process (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 100).

The study began with three full-day rapport-building visits in which the project was discussed with the children and they were familiarised with the methods and equipment, including the cameras and audio-recorders. Informal observations of children's use of the outdoor spaces were also made during this time, and throughout the study. Then, in pairs at a time, the eight children took me on guided 'tours' of the outdoor space at the setting, pointing out and photographing places they found 'interesting', 'special' or 'important'. Conversations during these tours were audio-recorded. The following visit, the photos were used as the focus of an informal conversation with each pair. During these conversations, each child was invited to identify three photos showing the most important places he or she had photographed. The selected photos were added to a documentation book (see below) that progressively told the story of the research.

To provide another context for conversation, the three photos selected by each child were added to a PowerPoint slideshow that was shown to the eight children on my next visit. Also, because children had frequently mentioned lighthouses, steps, and being 'up', photos of other spaces containing these elements were also included. The slideshow was set as a continuous loop in a storeroom opening onto the outdoor environment and children in the subset were invited to join me to view it at their leisure. On another visit, children were invited to draw their ideas about outdoor spaces and to provide narrations of these drawings.

Documentation book

The research was narrated in a documentation book that included conversation snippets, children's photographs and drawings, and my interpretations. The book was displayed at the setting in a prominent position accessible to children, educators and families. It was compiled collaboratively by the children and me to provide an opportunity for 'visible listening' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 68), allowing all participants—children, educators, families and me—to listen to each other. This feedback was crucial to the research design and allowed me to constantly check that the children agreed with what was being said about them.

Findings

Data analysis began at the outset of data generation. Initially, observations, photos and conversation transcripts were analysed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding involves identifying and naming all potentially relevant pieces of data, in response to the questions, 'What is this? What does it represent?' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 63). These codes were later axially coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) into broader categories, or themes. Four themes ultimately emerged from this process: *places for socialising*; *places for pretending*; *places for observing*; and *places for moving*. As a means of illustrating some of the findings of this study, examples from each of these themes will be presented below.

Places for socialising

Despite repeated reminders that I wanted to know what children thought were the most interesting or special *places* at the centre, they were keen to include people in their photographs, conversations and drawings. None did this more overtly than Layla who managed to resist my prompting while we were on tour:

Jane: [emphasising the words 'place' and 'where']
Places. Where's that? Remember, you are showing me the important places. Okay, so where's the next important place?

Layla: *They have to be persons, I think.*

When I later asked Layla to select three photos of the most important places, even though she had taken some photos that did not have people in them, she chose one I had taken of her and two of other children. It could be tempting, perhaps, to believe that a three-year-old may not have a clear notion of 'place', however Layla demonstrated she indeed understood the notion in this encounter:

Child: *Take a picture of me!*

Layla: *No, I'm not taking a picture of you. I'm taking a picture of the places. Jane said.*

Children did not directly make statements like, 'I like this place because I can play with others in it'. Rather, this was inferred from their choices of place, other conversations, and observations. For example, during the photo-elicitation, I noticed Thierry looking closely at a photo he had taken of the swings. I asked him if he played on the swings and he replied:

Thierry: *Yes I do. Look, one, two. So two people.*

It may be that Thierry was demonstrating his counting prowess, or indeed, something completely different. Nonetheless, I interpreted this as demonstrating his desire to be with others, in the light of the other pieces of the mosaic, most particularly my observations on every visit to the site of Thierry actively initiating and maintaining social interactions with both children and adults.

On the tour, Travis frequently took several photos from a range of angles of his nominated important places, but when it came to selecting one from his series of 'lighthouse' (the children's name for two one-metre-high platforms) photos for inclusion in the documentation book, he was definite about his choice:

Jane: *The lighthouse—okay. Is that the best photo of the lighthouse that you took? I think there are some over there as well.*

Travis: *This one with Ryan [Travis's friend].*

Jane: *That one with Ryan in it? What's special about that one?*

Travis: *Ryan is there.* (Figure 1)

By choosing this photo, I inferred that this place was important for Travis for the potential it afforded to be with his friends.

Figure 1. Travis's photograph of the 'lighthouse'



Often, as if to affirm their relationship, each child in the pair took photos of the same thing, celebrating the act with an excited gesture or statement, frequently using the plural pronoun:

Travis: *We both take photos of the swings!*

In another gesture of solidarity, children often also took photos of each other, as in the photos by Travis and Thierry taken from opposite ends of what they called the 'dark tunnel' (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Travis and Thierry's photographs of each other in the 'dark tunnel'



Places for pretending

On the tours, all eight children photographed the playhouse (which children referred to as the 'hut' or the 'cubby') and the raised play structure (which children called the 'bridge'), often several times. When I asked the children what they did in these places, they frequently said, in a tone that suggested they thought I was asking a ridiculous question, that they 'played'. When I asked them what they played, the possibilities seemed endless:

Ashlee: *Baby games, dog games, and cat games, and mummy and daddies games, and I like playing granma games.*

Alternatively, my 'what do you play?' question triggered stories that sounded like they had been imagined many times:

Charlie: *A three-hour tour.*

Jane: *A three-hour tour?*

Charlie: *Yeah. On Gilligan's Island* I had a three-hour tour. They crashed on the island because there was some storm.*

Levi: *I'm going to take a picture of the storm things in here!*

Charlie: *Me too! I'm going to take a picture of the river starting getting rough!*

Jane: *So you play in here sometimes?*

Levi: *Yep, we do. Because we take holidays to go over to this house. This is in holidays.*

Charlie: *That's important. That's important, yes.*

* 1960s sitcom being re-run on Australian TV at the time of this study.

Pretending was often given as the reason for preferring other places as well. For example, Travis photographed a semicircular seating arrangement (Figure 3) and named it 'the train'. We sit on the seat and then we go. I can drive'. He mentioned this train on a number of subsequent occasions. When I asked him if there was anything in the outdoor area that he thought should be changed, he told me an elaborate story about turning the train into a flying train that picked up and dropped off children all around the centre ... and the world.

Figure 3. The train



During the course of the research, the children constantly regaled me with imaginative tales. For these children, the outdoors provided many possibilities for imagining and pretending.

Places for observing (the near and the far)

Children's propensity for observation of their surroundings was very apparent in their photographs (Figure 4). They paid attention to close-up details, as well as those that were far away.

Figure 4. Thierry's photos of the near and the far



Many of the photographs were taken at very close range, to the point of being out of focus, even with an automatically-focusing camera (Figure 5). At first, I thought this was due to inexperience with the camera and I tried to give guidance:

Jane: *Sometimes when you are trying to take a photo you sometimes need to stand back from it.*

Travis: *Maybe.*

However, as Travis's demurral helped me realise, it was the children's intention to get in close—it was the detail they were interested in.

Figure 5. Examples of children's photos of detail



On the other hand, the importance of having a vista was repeatedly reiterated and, of the four most frequently photographed places (the bridge, the swings and the lighthouses), three provided an opportunity to watch the goings-on of the outside area (Figure 6). Many photos were taken of the view from these vantage points, often through railings and past other obstacles. Tara said that the lighthouses were the best places to play at the centre:

Tara: *I always play in them. We like it.*

Jane: *Why's that?*

Tara: *Because we can look out.*

The bridge was also valued for its height and potential to watch the surroundings. Travis, who took a total of 87 photos, identified the bridge and the lighthouse as two of the three most special/interesting places. I asked him what he did on the bridge:

Travis: *We just climb on it so people don't catch us. We look at people walking under the bridge.*

Jane: *So it's a good place for looking?*

Travis: *Yep, and this one* [handing me a picture of lighthouse].

But it wasn't only the high places from which children surveyed the terrain. The swings provided this opportunity as well; on each visit I observed children using the swings as a vantage point. Ashlee, who I often observed on the swings, told me: 'I look at the grass and the sandpit and I look at the grass'. Although she did not specifically mention the people on the grass and in the sandpit, my observations suggested she was a very keen people-watcher from her position on the swings.

Figure 6. Examples of children's photos taken from vantage points



Places for moving

'Moving' was another theme revealed by this study. It featured in all of my encounters with the children. They led the tours at a brisk pace, sometimes at a gallop, as we went across, into, up, down, in and through various locations in the outdoor area. On several occasions I had to ask them to wait for me as I caught up. Even the interviews were conducted on the move, either with me sitting still while the children moved about me, or while we both walked and climbed about the outdoor area. All of the children used words that described movement—both on the tours, and in subsequent conversations—words such as up, down, run(ning), jump(ing), ride(ing), swing(ing), slide(ing), came up repeatedly.

For example, in describing a drawing (Figure 7) showing important places outside, Levi said:

I like running around, playing chasey, hide and seek, going in the tunnel and going on the bridge. I like playing chasey with my friend Charlie. I like running on grass the best 'cause I can run faster.

Figure 7. Levi's drawing of important places outside



All eight children took a photo of the swings. This concurs with Holmes & Procaccino's (2009) study which found swings to be the most popular playground choice of girls, and the second most popular playground choice of boys. For some children the swings were a place for observing, as already discussed, but for others, swings were mentioned in association with other elements that involved movement:

Jane: *The swings are the best place to go?*

Thierry: *Yep, I fly. And the slide.*

Jane: *Oh, and the slide? So, the swings and the slide?*

Thierry: *And the jumping mats.*

The movement aspect was also articulated by Tara as she took a photo (Figure 8) of one of the jumping mats:

Tara: *Jumpy, jumpy, jumpy, jumpy.*

Figure 8. Tara's photo of the jumping mat



Discussion

The outdoors is important

It was clear the outdoors was important for these children. In fact, during a camera familiarisation session at the outset of the study when the children were invited to take photos of the important places *inside*, three of the children took photos through the door to the outside. Clark (2007b) had a similar experience in England when a four-year-old child also took a photo of the outside through a door, so this is not an isolated event. This study has also found that the outdoors, in this setting at least, offers places for *socialising, pretending, observing* and *moving*, and these are much valued by the children. Other outdoor settings may not offer these possibilities. Nonetheless, the study has implications for those who are responsible for designing outdoor spaces and curriculum for young children and these will now be discussed.

Places for socialising

In UK and Scandinavian studies that have examined young children's perspectives about the educational spaces they inhabit, places to be social have been identified as being important (Clark, 2005, 2007a; Clark & Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005). In these studies, many of the social spaces were outside. The importance of social spaces was also one of the major findings in research undertaken in Australia by Fleet and Britt (2011) in their investigation of children's memories of their first year of primary school, and, like the other studies, many of these social spaces were also outdoors. The study reported here only investigated outdoor spaces; therefore, it makes a further contribution through its finding that within an outdoor space, places to be social are highly valued by the children.

For educational institutions, this is an important finding. Vygotsky (1978, p. 88) states that 'human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them'. Bruner (1986) too has proposed that learning is not merely a solo pursuit, but is also a communal activity: 'It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture' (p. 127).

Given that the outdoor spaces are integral to early childhood educational settings, it would therefore seem to be paramount that these environments enable the communal making of knowledge. Outdoor spaces in such settings are not just places to let off steam or relax, they are places for learning, so the need for these environments to facilitate learning is vital. In this study, places for being social were intimate and partially enclosed. Enclosure may not be the only way spaces can facilitate being social, but those responsible for designing outdoor spaces need to consider ways for children to be together in outdoor spaces. This is not just a matter of physical design but is also a consideration of curriculum, the provision of equipment and materials, and pedagogical approaches.

Places for pretending

In his poem, *No way: the hundred is there*, Malaguzzi (as cited in Edwards et al., 2012, p. 3) laments that 'the school and the culture ... tell the child that ... reality and fantasy ... do not belong together'. Malaguzzi would have been encouraged to see this was not the case at the site where this study was conducted. As Malaguzzi (1993, p. 12) states:

... we should not forget the relevant role of make-believe play. This type of symbolic play is pervasive in young children's experience and has an important role in the social development of intelligence, development of skills needed for reciprocity among children, the potential for children to persist in activity and conversation together and the development of the ability to create symbols.

Paley (1990, 2004b), who developed a teaching approach fostering play and children's storytelling, also argues strongly for pretend play in early childhood educational settings. However, Paley (2004a) notes that, in recent years, time available for pretend play has been reduced to make way for academic instruction. This is ultimately counterproductive as pretending plays a significant role in children's construction of knowledge (1990, 1997, 2004b). As Paley (2004a, p. 92) notes: 'Pretending is the most open-ended of all activities, providing the opportunity to escape the limitations of established rituals. *Pretending* [original emphasis] enables us to ask "What if?"'

Providing places for children's pretend play is a challenge for educators whether children are inside or outside (Rogers & Evans, 2007). Outdoor environments do not inherently provide places to pretend and have the potential to be just as limiting as those indoors. For example, Clark (2010, pp. 74–75) describes a playground which consisted of a 'sea of bark chippings with isolated play equipment' where the only place that had a story associated with it was a muddy pit at the edge of the space. On the other hand, in Moore and Wong's (1997) 10-year study of the transformation of a school yard from barren asphalt to a lush, naturalised environment, imaginary play featured very strongly, particularly in the areas where natural elements were most prevalent and where the variety of small spaces and loose parts ensured 'the possibilities were infinite' (p. 109).

Places for observing

Children's eye for detail has also been documented in studies of school-aged children in the outdoors (Hart, 1979; Moore & Wong, 1997; Titman, 1994). Moore and Wong (1997) documented the children's use of 'microsettings' (p. 10) such as benches and ledges, the tops of fence posts and the forks of bushes and trees, in which the smallest of materials, even pollen, were used by the children. In studies of younger children, Clark and Moss (2005)

noted a number of instances of children taking close-up photographs of toys, fixtures and items such as pebbles.

However, children observe the bigger picture too. The importance of places that provide opportunity to observe have been identified by studies of children's use of play environments (Hart, 1979; Moore & Wong, 1997). In these studies, lookouts were often hidden places where children could watch the surroundings without being seen: 'Children liked to perch above their surroundings in such a way that they could survey the whole scene yet at the same time remain separate—having the ability to see while not being seen' (Moore & Wong, 1997, p. 73). The desirability of high places is also identified by children in Fleet and Britt's (2011) study of first grade primary school students. A wall at this site provided a valued place to watch from, as one of the children explained: 'And we can see better on it. We like the wall because it's nice and warm ... and you can see better on it' (p. 155).

Children's penchant for taking photos of both the very near and the very far has also been recorded by Clark (2010) who suggests that children's capacity to seek security in what is intimately known while also relishing the wide blue sky has been overlooked by designers of spaces for young children. This suggests that in designing outdoor spaces for children, consideration needs to be given to not only to enclosed spaces that encourage observation at close range, but also spaces that afford children the opportunity to observe their surroundings from a distance. At the site studied in this research, these spaces were often elevated; however, other spaces, such as the swings, were also favoured places from which to watch goings on both within and outside centre grounds.

Places for moving

Early childhood settings have an important role to play in providing opportunities for children to be physically active, although seeing the outdoors as being purely for active play overlooks the vast number of other possibilities the outdoors offer (Maynard & Waters, 2007; Robertson, 2009). Nonetheless, the children in this study were constantly on the move and greatly valued the opportunities to be physically active that this particular space afforded them. This may not be the finding in other settings. Indeed, studies of US and European early learning settings have found levels of physical activity are typically very low, while levels of sedentary behaviour are typically high (Reilly, 2010). Simply having an outdoor space does not mean it facilitates children's desire to move. Rather, it is the policies, practices, attitudes and culture of the setting that determine the amount of physical activity that children undertake (Emilsen & Koch, 2010; Moser & Martinsen, 2010; Pate, Pfeiffer, Trost, Ziegler & Dowda, 2004). In addition, the physical features of the outdoor environment, such as the amount of space per child and the presence of vegetation, appear to be important influences on physical

activity (Trost, Ward & Senso, 2010). Furthermore, the addition of loose unstructured materials increases playfulness (Bundy et al., 2008), variety of activity (Moore & Wong, 1997), and activity levels (Bundy et al., 2009) among children in the early school years.

Interdependence of themes

It is important to note that although the four themes of places to be social, pretend, observe and move have been isolated here for the purposes of discussion, in reality they nearly always coexisted. For example, moving involved pretending, pretending involved being social—and so on. This example from my notes while ‘on tour’ illustrates this interdependence:

Travis: [said while running around the grassed area—me in pursuit] *When I was playing with Ryan and Layla we gotta some sprinkly things [plastic stepping ‘stones’] and the monsters would die. We’re getting sprinkly things [demonstrates]. Scuse me, Lucy [educator], we’re getting all the sprinkly things so we can kill all the monsters.*

Travis is being social, pretending, observing and moving all at the same time. Each is dependent on the other, and speaking about each theme separately masks the complexity of the way that the children were experiencing the outdoor space.

It is also important to note that this study was a single case in which eight children’s perspectives were sought. The themes that emerged are not finite and may have been observed and interpreted differently by another researcher. Nonetheless, readers may be able to draw parallels with other early childhood contexts and thus the findings from this study may open a dialogue for possibilities in the outdoor spaces in other settings.

Conclusion

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) suggests outdoor environments are integral to young children’s learning environments; however, space can enhance or inhibit children’s competence by the way it stimulates their curiosity, skills, actions and communication (Rinaldi, 2006). As children are the actual users of outdoor space in educational settings, understanding what children think is important in these spaces and is vital if children’s competencies are to be enhanced rather than limited. This study, by seeking to give voice to children’s knowledge, insights and emotions regarding the outdoor space they encountered, revealed that in this particular setting, children value the opportunity to move, pretend, observe, and do these things in a social context. Such insights will be crucial to future decision making regarding outdoor provision and use at this particular site, but they also offer a provocation for those responsible for the design

of curriculum and outdoor spaces at other learning settings for young children.

Figure 9. Drawing by Travis: ‘Travis, Thierry and Jane standing on the bridge’



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