

“Play in Focus”: Children Researching Their Own Spaces and Places for Play¹

Catherine Burke
School of Education
University of Leeds, UK

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Abstract

Young children are traditionally misunderstood and overlooked as expert communicants of their own cultures and are generally dismissed as a reliable resource for understanding neighborhood and community issues. This article will describe and discuss an intervention that attempted to position the child as expert and researcher of their own play environments. In this study, 32 primary school children from two schools situated in east Leeds, Yorkshire, England, used disposable cameras over a one week period in the autumn of 2002 to record and later reflect on their preferred spaces and places for play. The process explored means of engaging children as researchers of their own environments offering them the tools of the photo-diary and the technique of photo-elicitation in generating data designed to influence policy for planning and change of play strategies at local and national government levels. This article discusses the data generated in terms of what the participative process attempted reveals about the capacities of young children to contribute to the planning and design agenda for supporting children's play in 21st century childhood in urban environments.

Keywords: [play](#), [children's participation](#), [visual research methods](#), [England](#)

Introduction

The environments in which children and young people live and develop have changed markedly in modern societies—so much so that some have suggested that childhood is unrecognizable when compared with the experience of previous generations. One of the sources of this so-called “disappearance” of childhood is the impact of technology and the changed nature and place of play (Postman 1982). For adults, children’s capacities for play in urban environments present serious challenges. For parents, today’s outdoor environment suggests risk and children are more likely than in previous generations to experience prohibitions on their freedom to roam. The home, particularly the bedroom and immediate outdoor garden or yard, presents children with play opportunities far more sophisticated than in previous generations but allows less active physical engagement with the material world and can contain potential new risks, such as those associated with online predators. Planners of urban environments design spaces and places for play to meet the concerns and needs of the adult community as much those of the child. Understanding how children appreciate spaces and places for play is important in countering the balance of adult agendas which may or may not have an accurate appreciation of children’s priorities.

What are the best means of allowing for the view of the child to be appreciated? What should be the role of the adult in a research environment and can children’s participation as researchers and reporters on their own preferred spaces and places for play be achieved?

In recent years there has been an interdisciplinary turn towards the use of visual techniques in researching children’s cultures and material contexts for learning and play. Concurrently, researchers have sought to facilitate and allow for children’s specific “ways of seeing” to be evidenced. This turn to the visual has created new research agendas by promoting new ways of understanding children’s experience in cultural contexts in Europe, Scandinavia, the USA and Australia. Such a re-focusing can illuminate what has been suggested as “the blind spot” created by more traditional ways of conducting research about or with children and young people (Walker 1993). Traditional, adult research methods about children’s experiences habitually fail to identify and therefore miss the opportunity to examine the detail of children’s lived experience. The research discussed in this article, however, supports the claim that “urban children who are given some autonomy in their built environment can be keen observers and highly skilled visual and spatial thinkers” (Gallagher 2004, 251).

Visual Methods of Enquiry into Children’s Play Worlds

During the 1950s and 1960s, Iona and Peter Opie explored children’s school-based culture in the British Isles through the language and lore of playground games and rituals (Opie and Opie 1959). Through the medium of language, the richness of children’s culture was clearly demonstrated, but while the focus was on a restricted space—the schoolyard—there was a tendency to disregard the space itself in its visual and the material aspects. Some years later, environmental psychologist Roger Hart incorporated photography into his exploration of the informal landscape of children’s play, demonstrating through his focus on space and material culture a hitherto unexplored territory of childhood (Hart 1997; 1998). This work can be seen to have laid the foundation

for much current interest in how children and young people interact with the natural and built environments (Holloway and Valentine 2000).

An exploration of children's environments leads to visual methods of enquiry since the dimensions and dynamics of children's relationship to place and space may be more easily described in imagery than in text. Currently an array of significant texts, for example, Prosser (1998), Banks (2001), Rose (2001), and Jewitt and Oyama (2001) provide insightful, varied and rigorous discussion of contemporary visual methods, which can legitimately be applied to working with children. Unsurprisingly, child-focused researchers have adopted, adapted and refined these approaches for their own needs and child-centric visual studies such as *Seeing Kid's Worlds* (Wagner 1999) and *The School I'd Like* (Burke and Grosvenor 2003).

Currently there is an international interest in understanding the ways that the material culture of children's learning environments might be designed to enhance learning, social behavior, health and well-being. At the same time, there is growing international interest in engaging children and young people in the design and planning process (Clarke 2004). Children's participation in decision-making—contributing to local initiatives such as the design of a new kindergarten or school or in bringing about changes to the outdoor play area—has been the focus of innovative initiatives. In a previous issue of this journal, Rene J. Dierkx has shown how children have been engaged in contributing to the process of designing a new school environment in Kenya, contributing their own drawings and plans (Dierkx 2003).

Research *on* children as subjects has a long history, but only recently, in the decade following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, have those researching children's lives come to question the research relationship and move towards a position of research *with* children (James and Prout 1997). Towards the end of the 20th century, the emphasis on children's rights created a new ethical framework for research involving children which pays more than lip service to the importance of getting children's permission to scrutinize and record their lives. In the early 21st century, the paradigm is shifting still further, positioning children as researchers of their own worlds.

One example in the UK is the Children's Research Centre at the Open University which aims to "empower children and young people as active researchers." (For information about the Centre, see <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk/home.html> accessed 2004-12-12.) To date, however, this initiative has not stressed the significance of visual approaches in enabling children to engage critically with their environments.

Another example is the "mosaic approach" developed by Alison Clark and Peter Moss, a technique of listening to the voices of very young children. The mosaic approach is a flexible, adaptable multi-method tool in which children's own photographs, tours and maps can be combined with talking and observing to gain deeper understanding of children's perspectives on the places they inhabit in their early childhood. Thus, children, if allowed to express themselves non-verbally, are empowered as experts in their own lives, researchers of their own environments and communicators of intimate knowledge (Clarke 2004).

Research that uses children as active informants on their perception of place or space is concerned less with the development of technical and conceptual competence and more with the interface between the formal and informal spaces that children respond to and reconstruct. At this interface are children's places for play which are invisible to the adult eye. The work of Rasmussen has shown how children can use photography to bring to light their ways of playfully inhabiting space. This work contrasts the "more differentiated picture of children's spaces" produced by children's integrated photographs and stories with adult perceptions of spaces for play (Rasmussen 2004). This approach reveals the meanings, feelings and personal histories interwoven into children's places; What to adults might seem to be insignificant, an obstruction or an "eyesore" often is shown to be of vital importance to children.

These and other examples of research *with* children, using visual methodologies, encourage participation and active involvement and are framed by an approach which recognizes that young people are experts in their own worlds and have distinctive ways of seeing. However, the question of how far and in what ways research *with* children can be transformed into research *by children* and *on behalf of children* remains. The research is not neutral but colored with assumptions about children's capacities according to age or stage of development. The context of the research shapes the responses and behaviors of researchers, adult and child alike. The project discussed here uncovers some of these factors that shape the research processes and outcomes.

"Play in Focus" Case Study

"Play in Focus" was a case study within a larger project which was designed to investigate and evaluate children and young people's informal and formal play opportunities in East Leeds, Yorkshire, England (Armitage 2004). The objective of the case study was to attempt to bring into focus the detail of primary school age children's play experience in terms of the spaces, places and objects they preferred. One of the questions driving the case study was methodological: to see what would happen when young children were given the responsibility to collect research data autonomously. The research was carried out in the autumn of 2002 with two groups of children in two Leeds primary schools in the neighborhoods of Rothwell and Seacroft.

Rothwell and Seacroft are contrasting communities with similar sized populations. Young people between the ages of 5 and 15 make up 14 percent of the population in Rothwell and just over 19 percent in Seacroft. However, Seacroft is a relatively poor community. As a landscape, it appears bleak and unwelcoming to the stranger. Approximately half of Seacroft residents have no access to a car. Over 50 percent are council tenants and both health and economic activity are well below the average for Leeds. Rothwell is a relatively more comfortable community with over 80 percent owning their own homes and a lower level of unemployment. Both communities are almost universally white.

Adult involvement was minimized and confined to the setting up of the project and the introduction of research tools to the researchers who were primary school children between the ages of 7 and 11 years. The children used simple cameras to construct photo diaries to document the spaces and places where they play during one week. This undertaking was completely in the hands of the children and there was a large element of trust, commitment and responsibility

generated from initial discussions about their role in the research process. The children were instructed to keep ownership of the camera and to record the site of their play each day, even if that site was the same each day. They were encouraged not to go out of their way to change their play patterns during the week of the research. Through discussion, the children realized they would be like detectives, looking for clues that told the story of their own activity.

Methodological Challenges

Placing a camera in the hands of the subject of research in educational contexts is a decision that is not without its challenges. First, one has to overcome the assumption that prevails within school environments that knowledge is owned, controlled and transferred to others by adults. This cultural knowledge of school is powerfully held by child and adult alike. To suggest otherwise is counter to what the school is perceived to be about. Therefore an important early stage in the research process must be to work towards an acceptance that children's knowledge of their own worlds is owned by them and that they are the experts in knowing and recording their own worlds.

Children respond to photography in ways that betray their recognition that photographic images and camerawork are valued highly in society. In the family context, ownership and control of the camera usually belongs to a parent; while most children will have access to cameras, a parent usually takes the family snapshots as well as compiles the photo albums.

The young researchers had to adhere to a distinct agenda in the "Play in Focus" project. This agenda, namely to record everyday places and spaces for play, was developed through discussion with the children. It emphasized the very special role that they would occupy in the research as experts in their own lives with special stories to tell. The requirement to focus on *spaces* and *places* of play, was explained. This in itself posed a challenge to the children who would normally expect to see themselves or other members of family or friends within the photographic frame. The idea that the product—in this case, a photographic image—might in the end feature nothing but grass, confronts the normal processes and unspoken rules of photography with which even the youngest children appeared to be familiar.

Group conversations focused on what cameras are, how they operate in simple terms, what kind of photographs we are familiar with, who takes photographs, and how photographs are valued and used. The children were then offered pencils and pads and were asked to draw a photograph. This stage in the preparatory process allowed the notion of framing a subject to be discussed, illustrated and shared. Only after two such preparatory group meetings did the children receive a camera.

The next potential challenge was ensuring the child researchers would be able to retain control of the camera for a full week. Since they were to be the principal researchers of their own lives during that time and their spaces and places of play might be anywhere, an important discussion took place concerning what means they might use to protect their ownership and control of the process of photograph making from parents, friends and older siblings in the home context and teachers in the school context.

All children who participated produced a set of photographs. Through the whole collection it is clear that the focus on spaces and places for play was well understood and interpreted in a fascinating ways. For many, for instance, family pets were an important "space" for play even though the place they occupied obviously changed. Most impressive was the close attention children gave to keeping an eye on space. In conversations about their photographs a few children apologized for allowing other children to creep into the frame. At the center of giving children cameras is passing control to them—what Dell Clark (1999) calls "auto-driving."

Spaces and Landscapes: Gathering the Data

In each neighborhood, 20 children who were pupils at the two participating primary schools participated in the project: 40 children in total. Half of these were between six to eight years of age; half were between nine and eleven years of age. Out of that group, eight children, equally distributed between the two schools, dropped out of the project for a variety of reasons so that 16 children in each neighborhood produced a photographic diary of their own sites of play. Within the time constraints set by the schools, and due to children's absences, it was not possible to interview every child. In total, 12 recorded interviews were carried out at Rothwell while it was only possible to record interviews with ten children at Seacroft. All the children's photographs, however, have been analyzed as part of the research. The gender distribution was unequal. At Rothwell, where the teachers had simply asked for volunteers, only two out of 16 who took part and produced photographs were boys. At Seacroft, where the selection had been made by the teachers, five boys took part.

The children were enthusiastic participants in the research. This was the case equally in the school in which teachers had selected individual children to provide for optimum diversity in level of school performance, ethnicity and gender as well as in the school which had simply asked for volunteers. In total, 32 children produced 639 images: the total number produced by children living in Seacroft was 310; the total number produced by children living in Rothwell was 329. The number of images successfully produced by any one child ranged from four to 28. There was very little difference in the number of images produced according to age: on average the older children produced 19 images while the younger children produced 20 images. All children appeared to understand the task and carried it out appropriately.

Conversations about Images—Some Methodological Observations

Photo elicitation is the coupling of words and images, allowing for an interaction between the two. The images may be found or made: in this instance they were made by children who were invited to talk about them.

The aim usually is to explore the meaning of the images with the respondent. Previous work has explored various ways of achieving this. Banks (2001), for example, points to photographs acting as a neutral third party facilitating a more relaxed atmosphere for interviewing since eye-to-eye contact need not be maintained.

There is no standard protocol for using photo elicitation and it is a technique which can be adapted to different contexts. In this case, the child-researchers were relatively young; the place of discussion was their school and the adult

conversant was not well known to them. The research was exploratory and as such, conversation could have been allowed within a completely unstructured free narrative approach or in a rather more structured context. In this study, to allow the interests and views of both the child and the adult to be illustrated and considered, a simple structure was imposed. First, the images were opened and laid out randomly, allowing the child photographer to react. The "magic" of seeing the photographs for the first time and finding out if they had "worked" was palpable. While digital cameras give the photographer the immediate possibility of seeing and evaluating an image, the result of the pictures taken with traditional cameras with loadable film (such as those used by the children in this study) are not immediately knowable and must be anticipated over a period of time. This affects the process of deciding whether to take a photograph and it creates a particular response when the photographs are revealed as a collection for the first time.

After a complete survey of the collection, the child was invited to choose one photograph and to talk about what it showed and why they particularly liked it. This was straightforward apart from the difficulty of limiting the choice. Once this was discussed thoroughly, the adult researcher chose one image and invited the child to talk about it. The choice of the second image was based on a hunch that the adult's view of the image or ways of understanding the meaning of the photograph might be challenged by the child. Another factor influencing the choice of the second image to be discussed was countering and balancing the child's choice. Hence, if the child had chosen an indoor site, the adult tried to counter this by choosing an image of an outdoor site.

All conversations occurred between the adult researcher, the child photographer, and one other child who was present and was encouraged to take part in the conversation, ask questions and add information. The rationale was that in this way, the children would be more at ease with one another and be encouraged to respect each other's point of view while acknowledging their sharing of a common culture. Each discussion was recorded.

What can be said about the conversations and talk around the images?

The Influence of Context

The conversational style was sometimes influenced by the immediate context of classroom and school; thus, a child might speak in a way that they considered acceptable in this setting. This is illustrated in the following extract from a discussion with Anne, age 7.

Researcher: Ok then, A, I'd like you to choose now, one photograph to tell a little bit more about what's going on in the photograph, where it is and why you think it's a good photograph of where you play.

Anne: I don't know!

Child1: That one.

R: Take your time to choose.

A: I don't want to talk about a picture with Mrs. S in.

R: No, you don't do you?

A: She's a nasty teacher.

R: Choose something that you could tell a bit of a story about what's going on there.

A: Once upon a time there was some cheese...

R: Well, you're going to have to... Come on, choose a photograph.

A: Once upon a time there was some cheese.

R: That one? Ok, let's choose this one then.

A: No no no, the one with the trees and the ground.

R: Ok, the trees and the ground. Right, tell us where that is.

A: This is the school field and in the school field there are lots of children playing and here are the trees and there are some houses and there is L. and A. and there is J. and a boy playing football.

R: Is that one of your favorite places to play?

A: Yes.

Figure 1. School Play Ground



The child appears to embark on telling a story in a format expected of her in the school. This powerfully suggests the way that the research process is impacted by the social and cultural context of school and particularly by the learned patterns of adult-child communication in such contexts.

The Influence of Adopting a Flexible Frame in the Elicitation Technique

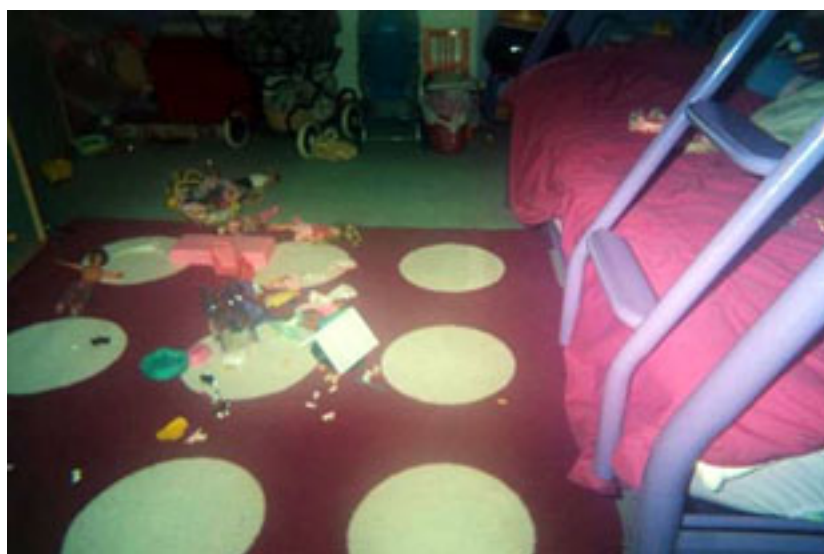
A certain relaxation of the imposed structure allowed flexibility and reflection to occur spontaneously resulting, perhaps, in less clear-cut messages but richer and more complex ones. This is illustrated here:

R: Ok. So if I asked you to choose one photograph to tell us a bit more about, which one would you choose, do you think?

By: I would choose... Could I choose two?

By: I like my bedroom. Which one of my bedroom is the best?

Figure 2. Child's Bedroom Floor



R: Ok, so they're both indoor places. And do you think you like playing indoors?

By: Yes. I love playing indoors 'cos I always play there whenever I want, like my mum today 'cos it's my sister's birthday today. It's her first birthday and every time we can go into the thing. Ooh, I forgot to take picture of something.

R: And what's that?

By: And the grass.

R: You like grass?

By: Yes, different kinds of grass 'cos I love playing on the grass.

R: You love playing on grass?

By: Yes 'cos I can do handstands and cartwheels.

Here a child whose "favorite place to play" is indoors has taken the opportunity of using the camera to explore the texture and finer detail of grass. She notes "there are different kinds of grass," illustrating her own intimate knowledge of play environments.

Figure 3. Grass



Invisible Visibles

The apparent emptiness of many of the images came into focus through discussion as children pointed out things just out of frame or that they felt that adults could not see or imagine. This is demonstrated in the following interaction about a very bare back garden which seemed, at first glance, to be an adult space.

R: Ok that's lovely. Right so I'll choose one now. Which one shall I choose? Let me see. I think I'll choose this. Which is your back garden with a bit of washing hanging up! Tell me what sort of play you do there.

D: We play football and swingball there as well. And I play in my wooden house there and sometimes climb the trees.

R: You can climb those trees, can you?

D: Yeah. They're quite tall. And that's my wooden house there and we play just down there a little bit. It's like pebbles and stones and big bricks. There. You can just see it a little bit.

And once again, in another photograph of a piece of scrubland in the school yard:

R: Ok, good. So I get to choose one I want you to talk about now. So

which one shall I choose? Let me see. Let's choose this one.

Ky: It's at school, in the playground.

R: So tell me a bit more about it. Why did you take it?

Ky: 'Cos I play there.

R: Is it a special place to play?

Ky: Yes 'cos we make shops and we sell things.

R: Oh right, it's a shop.

Ky: That's why we've got leaves and things and roses.

R: Ok, it's a shop there is it? Is that significant? [pointing to the jumper]

Ky: That's my jumper.

R: That's your jumper. Alright.

Ky: I'm wearing it today now.

R: And do these creatures stay there all the time?

Ky: Oh no, that's my wet time play toy but we take it outside sometimes.

R: Ok and who goes there? Is it the same people who go there all the time?

Ky: Yes.

Figure 4. School Play Ground Rothwell



Occasionally the obscure and overlooked can be lighted upon by the adult to draw attention to parts of the photograph which would seem to hold little interest. Here, the adult researcher points to a hard feature in the softer landscape of the garden and suggests the child talk about its significance for play. A misunderstanding occurs but the importance of the site is discussed clearly.

Figure 5. Back Garden, Rothwell



R: And what's significant about that? [meaning the manhole cover]

is: I don't know

R: Do you do anything with it?

is: No

R: Don't you?

is: No. I use it for playing with me soldiers

R: You do use it

is: Yeah

R: Why did you say no at first but actually you do use it. You do use it for playing with your soldiers.

is: No I don't use it, you know for stuff with

Ch1: Is it like for floods, like when there's a flood and you can go down

Ch2: No it's for people to go down to check

R: Yea, yea

Ch2: 'Cos it floods up the manhole

R: No, no. It's for him to play with his soldiers. Very good for marbles as well I think.

And here is a discussion about what seems to be small decorative features in an otherwise bland landscape:

Figure 6. School Grounds, Rothwell



R: So, I'm going to choose one that you can tell us a bit more about. This one. It's quite interesting

La: That's at school. We get lots of dead grass and just like stick it against the back fence and it looks kind of...

Ch1: It's not like a fence, it's like a...

R: Why? Why do you do that?

La: To make it look nice to put your head on and stuff. So you can lean against it.

R: Put your head on it?

La: Yeah and lean against it without...

R: And is it also you're decorating it and making it look nice.

La: Yeah, with flowers like a deck and everything. We play there

R: Nice. And what's this lot here? Did you make this as well or did

somebody...

La: No, it's just. That's just all leaves that were around. Dock leaves and stuff.

R: So that's a very special place. Do you play? What kind of games do you play there?

La: We play with the little ones sometimes and we just talk and things.

R: It's a talking place, is it? A talking corner. Do you have a name for that place? I'll meet you at the...?

La: Trees

Interpretation of Rules and Signs of Danger or Risk

Several children photographed spaces which were "out of bounds" or involved potential risk. The conversations about these images were cautious and the inequalities between the adult and child researchers became apparent, as illustrated in the following examples.

R: Right- I'm going to choose one now and you can tell me a bit about what you do in that space. I'm going to choose this one. The street with the cars. So, tell me why you've chosen those.

is: Because I ride me bike up and down because I'm not allowed out of the street unless it's with T and one of me other friends. Right. Down this street there's like... This is me next door neighbors', you see there. You see there's a hedge there. It goes down and then there's a wall like there and then in next to that there's a house there where my friend lives. Right, we fall out a lot but...

R: And on here you ride back and forward, up and down?

is: Yes but sometimes I go on my roller-skates.

What appears as an alien landscape to the adult observer is intimately known via distinct natural and man made features that to the child provide a sense of ownership and belonging. The image is transformed through conversation from one which suggests danger to one which means familiarity and structured play.

The many images of water in outdoor locations were also explored through the elicitation technique. Usually, it was the adult researcher who suggested that the child discuss the images showing streams and rivers. This may have been because the children were aware that these images were showing territory "out of bounds" according to the rules and boundaries set by their parents and guardians. A stream in the locality was clearly the focus of one set of images. However, in discussing the image, the child initially talked more of the surrounding "safe" area than of the stream itself as a site for play.

Figure 7. Road, Rothwell



R: It's a stream, is it?

g: Yeah, it comes through Wakefield as well. It's quite big.

R: And do you play there?

g: Well, I play around it on the field. Bits around it.

R: Do you think that's a fun spot to play? Quite fun to play?

g: Yeah, I like to play around by the bridge over there where you can cross it

R: Do you do anything with the water when you're playing?

g: No

Ch1: I do

R: You do?

Ch1: Yeah. I go fishing

R: You go fishing in that stream? Do you ever find anything?

Ch1: Yeah

Photo elicitation can illuminate the informal but often exact guidelines established by children's own culture of how what is played is determined. Voting is revealed to be an important part of the culture of the school

playground, and there are special places and significant features where it takes place.

Figure 8. Public Park near Rothwell



R: So when you get there, how do you decide what to do?

So: We sit on the logs and we vote like.

R: You vote?

So: Yes by putting us hands up and things.

R: You say which game shall we play today and who wants to do this and you vote?

So: Yes

R: Do you always vote?

So: Not all the time 'cos sometimes we... 'Cos if we played a good game the day before then we carry on it the day after.

R: Do you sometimes dib? Or choose with feet in.

So: No, not really.

R: You understand what I mean by that though?

So: Yes.

Analysis

Indoor and Outdoor Play

The first and major category of analysis is the number of images which showed indoor or outdoor spaces. It might have been that children of primary school age living in City neighborhoods might be expected to engage more in indoor than outdoor play. However, more children photographed outdoor spaces than indoor spaces. This was true of both sets of children in each of the two neighborhoods. From the total number of photographs produced (639), 448 or 70 percent showed outdoor spaces while 191 or 30 percent showed indoor spaces. In comparing the two sets of data, slightly fewer children from Seacroft showed outdoor play (70 percent) than children at Rothwell (75 percent). But while five children living in Seacroft showed more images of indoor than outdoor play in their individual photo diaries, no children in Rothwell showed more indoor than outdoor play in their individual photo diaries. When given the choice to talk about one photograph, twice as many children chose to talk about an outdoor space as chose to talk about an indoor space.

Open Spaces

The nature and availability of open spaces for play have been shaped by the contrasting housing types in the two East Leeds neighborhoods in this study. Seacroft, with its 1950s mix of semi-detached and high rise council stock is a typical landscape of green open spaces and enclosed squares. Rothwell, an old mining town that was further developed in the 1920s and 1930s, is more tightly knit and the open spaces shown by the children in this neighborhood are predominantly those supplied by the school grounds. This partly accounts for the large variance in the number of photographs of school grounds in the two photographic accounts of play spaces: Rothwell children showed 84 photographs of school grounds while Seacroft children showed only 27.

Overall, more children photographed open spaces than any other category: open spaces formed 16.05 percent of the total number of photographs followed closely by school grounds, 16 percent. Open spaces also featured highly in their conversation. There was a contrast in the response from the two sets of children: almost twice as many children living in Seacroft captured open spaces as the main focus of their collections of photographs overall. This could be explained by the architectural layout of the Seacroft estate which consists of concentrations of housing intersected by large open areas of grass or pathways. There could be a gender dimension to this finding as well, given that there were more boys involved in the Seacroft-based group as compared with the Rothwell group (Rothwell, 4: Seacroft, 6)

Open spaces photographed included the school field, seen both with and without children playing. When asked why it was good to play there, one child answered, "there's lots of space...there's space to be stupid." Often, in open spaces in the school grounds, very detailed and complex games are played, as indicated here by a seven-year old girl:

Right, that's the nature area near that and that's the wishing well and people put stuff in it and pretend it's gonna blow a bubble and a lot of people run around in it and do lots of stuff.

Not always used for running about, open spaces also provide opportunities for meeting and talking with friends. Particular features in open spaces such as prominent spots or lamp posts hold significant meaning and trigger memories in relation to play and friendship, as noted by Theo:

sometimes when it gets late at night and it gets dark, me and my friend A go on top of the hill and we just talk about things and we used to run down and we just went down the hill and there were like a fire and the firemen came and it were just a little like a chair and people and some children were putting it on fire and actual firemen came for it.

There was some variation in the amount of detail found in photographs of the two schools' schoolyards which reflected a far richer environment for play in one. The children who produced by far the most images of school ground spaces were those who had access to a play area that had been designed with serious consideration of the promotion of children's play. It contained many informal, "natural" areas, trees, bushes and rough grassy areas. Parents, friends of the school, teachers and children had constructed a play feature, a "Shitara," and several children were prompted by their photographs to explain the fantasy games that happened daily at this space. The disadvantage with this well-considered site for children's play was that it was not possible for children to visit there after school hours.

Formal playgrounds, however, did not feature often in the photographic diaries of the children, amounting to only 3 percent of all photographs. It was notable that parents prevented children from going freely to local parks, unless accompanied by parents or older siblings. The equipment in the parks was criticized for being age-limited—i.e., the space dictated, through its equipment, the age of child who should inhabit it for play. Skate parks, ramps, hard surfaces, open spaces and tennis courts were the most favored in conversation prompted by the photographs.

Closed Spaces

Indoor and outdoor play in closed, intimate or private spaces is an important strand of children's preferred play experience. When asked to choose a photograph to talk about many children chose a closed space. There could be various reasons for this but an important element seems to be the sense of enclosure and privacy such spaces provide, whether in a back garden, a bedroom, a cupboard or a car. Bedrooms were the focus of 8 percent of the photographs overall, and gardens of family or friends amounted to 15 percent. Ownership and belonging is important to children and the sense of pride in describing their own domestic spaces and achievements underlay conversation recorded in the data. Intimate, explorative and dramatic play such as dressing up could take place in spaces that felt safe and private where children were known and loved.

Several children photographed the interior or exterior of their family cars. One described how it was an important space for play. When asked why the car was liked as a space for play, the child replied,

'Cos it's cosy.

R: It's cosy too. So...but it's a place where you play?

L: Yes

R: What do you do in there then?

L: I pretend to drive.

Some of the most expressive comments about the pleasure of playing focused on family gardens. One child's photographic collection featured several photographs of plants and structures to support plants.

R: So, you like to grow things?

D: Yes

R: Do you think that's a kind of playing? Do you feel like you're having fun when you're growing things?

D: Yeah. I'm growing a cactus at the moment.

Figure 9. Domestic Yard, Seacroft



A focus on technology and various forms of screenplay formed a part of the collection and was the focus of some discussion. However, one might have thought that the computer would feature more often than it did. Only 22 photographs of computers were produced in total, 7 of which came from one child's collection. This ties in with the strong indication of a preference for outdoor play.

Space-Related Activities

Meeting and talking with friends outside of the formal landscape of school or the home is important for children's play and development of their sense of identity. Spaces that are significant in this respect contain important material objects known as gathering points, such as a lamppost. A lamppost may appear to be insignificant to the adult eye but is meaningful to a child in relation to play and the essential business of strengthening bonds of friendship. Only certain children will gather there and certain activities will happen.

A quiet road with parked cars on either side would not appear to be a landscape for children's play but the photograph presented in Figure 10 helps to illustrate the liveliness of these spaces for children for whom play out of doors is an important part of their lives.

Figure 10. Playing "Kerby"



This is not random activity but a traditional game, "Kerby," probably named as such and played by generations of children since the construction of roads with raised kerb stones. "Kerby" was talked about by boys and girls in both communities and by more than one set of children interviewed. Such consistency over time, in spite of the problems posed by motor cars, indicates the well-being of a transferable play culture and the importance of informal neighborhood landscapes for children's play.

Use of Natural Materials

Given that the research was carried out in densely populated city neighborhoods, it is significant that such a large proportion of the images and discussion drawn from the photographic diaries featured natural materials and environments.

A focus on the different types of grasses for playing on and with featured in several children's collections. Young children appreciate grass, its aesthetic, its feel, smell, and function as a building material. They fight with grass and they mark out their boundaries with grass. Grass left after a mowing can transform a

landscape into a new play opportunity. Often a photograph revealing little to the adult eye was transformed through conversation into a space offering great riches for play. Here is an example focusing on a patch of open grassy ground:

R: The green, you call it the green. Right ok. So what do you do on there?

L: I do handstands or cartwheels.

R: Handstands and cartwheels.

L: And build a house with grass.

R: Oh, how do you do that?

L: 'Cos I start where I want to sleep, yes, like in the middle of it so I go collect some grass and then put it in a line.

R: Oh, you put it in a line.

L: Yes like a square house.

R: Oh is that like dead grass so it stands out a bit more?

L: Yes

R: And what kind of shape do you make?

L: Square

R: A square shape. And do you do that with other people?

L: Yes

R: You make a house and then what do you do?

L: Nowt, just play in it.

R: You play in it. You do housey things do you? Like...?

L: What grown ups do.

R: Like mums and dads

L: Like clean up

R: Ok and how many of you do that together?

L: Three or four or five.

R: Well that's great. So do you ever have any problems finding enough grass to make a house?

L: No

R: That's good. Do you find any other bits and pieces to help make the house?

L: Yes, grass from my garden.

R: What?

L: Grass in my garden and things that are left over in the house.

Water found along pathways as puddles invites play; the local "beck" attracts, and a stream in the park with a pipe allows for paddling and balancing. Water featured in 4 percent of children's collections, usually as informal landscapes for play. However, children delighted in describing the importance of bathrooms, baths and showers as spaces for play.

Spaces featuring trees and bushes were highly important in discussion and significant categories of spaces for play in both neighborhoods but were far more prevalent in the photographic diaries of children living in Rothwell than in Seacroft. However, children in Seacroft who mentioned the importance of trees in their play had some rich detail to offer. For one child, a tree in a square was of great significance for play with both self and others. It became a "seat" for another child and a "cellar" for storing goods. One day, the tree was visited and half had been chopped down which caused some distress:

That bush, we made a den in there, me, A and my sister, we made a den in there but now all that side there has been chopped down so it's a bit harder and A's favorite seat what was up here it's been...that's half chopped off.

Figure 11. Tree, Seacroft



Trees provided raw material for building and construction as is illustrated here in this extract of conversation.

Je: I go on my bike and we play things like...we get this tree that's like darish and we take it, kick it cos we can mess about with it.

R: With the tree?

Je: Yes 'cos we peeled it all like a potato.

R: Did you?

Je: Yes and we managed to make loads and loads of paper.

R: Did you?

Je: Yes

R: Off the tree?

Je: Yes

R: Paper? You made paper?

Je: Yes. You put like this juice that comes out of it, you put it on some paper and you flatten it out a bit and I managed to make some paper. I made about 15 pieces.

R: From the tree?

Je: Yes. From three trees.

R: From three trees. You make paper?

Je: Yes.

Natural materials support imaginative play inside and outside of school grounds. The photographic collection produced some rich examples of the use of natural materials in play. "Shops" were situated along the bushy boundary of one school ground providing leaves, twigs and bark to "sell" to customers. Stones and pebbles were used to decorate special spaces in ways that probably adults were unaware of.

The children made the photographic diaries during one week in November. However, conversations about the images prompted talk about seasonal games and associated play demonstrating children's awareness of the passage of time and the seasonal impact on the material conditions of outdoor play. For example, they described throwing apples into the beck and illustrated the use of mown hay in constructing "houses" and dens.

Final Remarks

This project could be regarded as research *with* children because there was an underlying commitment to make research process transparent to the young participants, to hand to them the principal instruments of data collection and to involve them in the analysis of that data. But, since the project was part of a larger effort to identify and document the play opportunities available to children within a sector of the city of Leeds, in order to make planners and policy makers at the local government level aware of children's needs, the research described here could also be framed as research *for* children. It was certainly research *by* children who readily accepted their roles as investigators and recorders of their own experience and relished the opportunity to influence change. The conversations and interpretations of the children's visual diaries enabled their spatial knowledge and understanding of their neighborhoods to emerge.

The results from this study correlated to some extent with the findings of the larger study. Young children had an intimate knowledge of their neighborhoods and the formal and informal play opportunities there. Their play spaces were in school yards and open spaces between housing and they tended to stay within a close area to home or school. Natural materials and environments were very important to them and they reported how adults appeared to have little insight into this feature of children's play. This study also contributed a domestic dimension to the larger documentation of children's play through the evident importance attached to domestic interiors and immediate outdoor areas, i.e., gardens and yards of close family and friends.

The implications of this work are threefold. First, this project shows that children from a very young age are able to take on the roles of researcher and informant on their own lives and the lives of their peers. Under circumstances where the immediate research activity is clearly presented to the children as a vital element in bringing about change, children will rise to the challenge. They are anxious to be taken seriously as advocates of their own lives and relish the opportunity to tell of their experiences when they are listened to with respect and seriousness. Secondly, visual research methods, in particular the use of drawing and photographic journals, can engage children in detailing the meanings attached to their experiences and explaining the limited choices they are able to make every day in where they play.

Finally, this project presents a picture of urban childhood in the 21st century at odds with conventional adult popular opinion. In spite of the enormous barriers posed by the adult-centered built environment, children will play in ways that resemble features of play known to past generations in the UK and to contemporaries in urban environments across the globe. This work challenges the popular opinion, voiced so often by parents, grandparents, teachers and other adults concerned about the condition of modern childhood, that "children do not play like they used to" Children's play remains, as Colin Ward has noted, "the thing that children do, all the time and everywhere" (Ward 1990, 72). The challenge for the adult planners of community spaces is to see with the eyes of children and to allow for play opportunities that do not necessarily immediately serve adult interests and allay adult concerns. Thus, for example, to adults, the messiness of trees, bushes and waste ground combine with fears of children being out of sight; such views can act against the everyday interests of children in these spaces. These contrasting perspectives need to be brought to the fore

to enable an informed dialogue with children, parents, teachers and the wider community. In addition, adult anxieties related to children's apparent preoccupation with screen play, using computers and other devices in the home, is important to recognize but needs to be set against other trends which impact the nature and quality of children's play experience. For example, the reduction in play time for free play activities in the school day and restrictions around the use of school yards and play areas after school should figure prominently in the minds of adults when considering the significance of play in modern childhood.

This research has already had an impact. The city of Leeds is developing a ten year Play Strategy which draws from the results of the "Hide and Seek" and "Play in Focus" studies. It also has been featured in papers presented at international conferences and related articles (Armitage 2004). Further, there is interest in the findings from "Play in Wales," an independent charity funded by the Welsh Assembly government which is writing a new Technical Notes for playground design in Wales that incorporates some of the findings. Children are not children for long. While they are, their rich and intimate knowledge of the world of childhood should be allowed expression; who better to do this than children themselves?

Endnote

1. The author wishes to thank the children, teachers and parents of Rothwell Primary School and Swarcliffe Primary School, Seacroft, in Leeds for their participation, permissions and engagement in this study.

There is a website which contains all of the images and conversations which were generated through this research. It is accessible via the following link.

<http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/%7Eeducb/play/>

***Catherine Burke** is an historian of education and childhood. Her research interests are currently focused on how children and young people can be enabled to become partners with educational architects, planners and other practitioners in researching and shaping their environments for learning. She is also interested in how the view of the child has been historically neglected and is seeking ways to bring to the fore the children's creative contributions. She manages the undergraduate program, Childhood, Education and Culture (B.A. Hons) at the University of Leeds, School of Education.*

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