



Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rett20>

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Version of record first published: 28 May 2008.

To cite this article: Tim Waller (2007): 'The Trampoline Tree and the Swamp Monster with 18 heads': outdoor play in the Foundation Stage and Foundation Phase, *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 35:4, 393-407

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004270701602657>

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‘The Trampoline Tree and the Swamp Monster with 18 heads’: outdoor play in the Foundation Stage and Foundation Phase

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This paper considers pedagogy and outdoor play in the early years. The particular focus is on the specific features and benefits of outdoor play in the Foundation Stage (England) and Foundation Phase (Wales). The paper will draw on current international literature and evidence from outdoor learning constructed in an ongoing research project in two settings. In the project, children aged three to seven years are given regular opportunity to play and learn in natural wild environments. The paper will reflect on the development and opportunities for children’s play themes and how these impact on pedagogy in early years settings.

Introduction

Currently there is a great deal of interest in the use of outdoor environments in early years education in the UK, and both the proposed Foundation Phase in Wales (WAG, 2003) for children from three to seven and the new Foundation Stage in England for children from birth to five (DfES, 2007) emphasise the need for the provision of regular outdoor experience. However, a clear pedagogy for the use of the outdoors as a site for learning has not been established and, as Fjørtoft (2001) and Waite *et al.* (2006) point out, there has been relatively little research on what actually happens in outdoor environments.

This paper discusses pedagogy and outdoor play in the early years in relation to findings constructed in an ongoing research project in two settings (one in England and one in Wales). In the project, children aged three to seven years are given regular opportunity to play and learn in natural wild environments (such as woodland and river banks). The paper will reflect on the development and opportunities for children’s play themes and how these impact on pedagogy in early years settings. In particular, the paper will consider pedagogy in relation to the role of the early years practitioner in supporting the shared construction of knowledge and the curriculum

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with young children. It will contend that all children need opportunities for outdoor experiences both within setting and outside the setting in natural wild environments, and that any consideration and understanding of these outdoor experiences needs to be informed by children's views.

Young children's experience of the outdoor environment

Currently, there is considerable justification for turning our attention towards outdoor environments as a site for young children's play and learning. Firstly, in general, throughout western Europe facilities for play and opportunities for free play outdoors are declining (Fjørtoft, 2004) and there is growing statistical evidence that children spend increasing amounts of time inside at the expense of time playing outside (Learning through Landscapes, 2005) and that play in natural areas (wild spaces) is now 'relatively uncommon' (Maudsley & Smith, 2005, p. 8). Opportunities for outdoor play have become much more restricted over the last three generations due to a rise in traffic, the greater institutionalisation of childhood (breakfast and after school clubs, etc.) and parents' safety concerns (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Burke, 2005).

Casey (2007) contends that children have a need for regular time and space to play in a varied and interesting physical environment in order to draw on their own resources, develop their identity and social relations, connect to the community, have contact with nature and physical activity. The Children's Play Council (2002) suggest that outdoor play should also provide children with challenge in relation to the physical environment, opportunities to play safely with natural elements (earth, water, fire), opportunities for movement (running, jumping, climbing), stimulation of the five senses and experiencing change in the environment. Casey (2007) also argues that the outdoor environment should be thought of as a place that offers a range of opportunities, rather than being purely a set of physical features. As a result of restricted access to outdoor environments Waller (2006) claims that for many children, opportunities for play in natural environments (such as beaches, forests, mountains and riversides) have become ever more valuable and significant.

Outdoor play and learning

Early years teachers have long regarded outdoor play as an integral part of the curriculum (Cullen, 1993; Edgington, 2002) and the use of the outdoors as a site for learning is well established (Waite *et al.*, 2006). There is also clearly a current expectation that children will be given experiences outside the classroom in both policy (QCA, 2000) and guidance (DfES, 2005). For example, the DfES (2005, p. 2) states that, 'We believe that every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development' and that these experiences 'make a unique contribution to young children's lives' (2005, p. 11).

Outdoor play in the Foundation Stage

McGillivray (2007) outlines the specific features of the Foundation Stage in England (QCA, 2000) and how this is to be combined with *Birth to Three Matters* (SureStart, 2003) to become the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) from 2008 (DfES, 2007). One of the four principles informing the new EYFS is 'Enabling Environments'. The Practice Guidance document (DfES, 2007, p. 5) recognises that 'the environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning' and goes on to suggest that effective practice involves ensuring children have 'opportunities to be outside on a daily basis all year round' (Practice card 3.3).

Outdoor play in the Foundation Phase

Outdoor play is also firmly enshrined in the new Foundation Phase curriculum in Wales for children aged three to seven years (WAG, 2003). Wyn Siencyn and Thomas (2007, p. 149) argue that the Foundation Phase advocates a carefully planned play-based curriculum that aims to 'help children learn how to learn; develop thinking skills; and acquire positive attitudes to lifelong learning' (WAG, 2003, p. 12). The main focus of the Foundation Phase in Wales is the child's *personal, social development and well-being*, which is placed at the centre of the curriculum and is viewed as fundamental to young children's learning. Outdoor learning is also considered integral to the curriculum in each of the seven areas of learning in the Foundation Phase and activities are to be organised in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments. The Foundation Phase document also suggests a requirement to view the outdoors as an holistic part of the day-to-day environment where all aspects of the curriculum can be experienced (ACCAC, 2004).

However, as Waite *et al.* (2006) point out, outdoor learning is not a single entity but comprises many different sorts of activity with distinct purposes. Outdoor environments afford opportunities for a balance between adult-led structured activities and giving children access to interesting outdoor spaces. In terms of outdoor pedagogy, four significant issues are evident—these are now explored in turn:

1. *There is no clear guidance on outdoor pedagogy.* In current conceptions of pedagogy, there is a clear focus on instruction in literacy and numeracy (particularly in England and with children from the age of five years). Here the classroom is clearly defined as the site for learning and, in this context, a seamless transition between indoors and outdoors becomes more problematic. If the model of planning used inside takes precedence, opportunities for learning in outdoor environments may be limited or even lost. However, there are early years settings where the classroom is not defined as the site for learning and where the pedagogical approaches are consistent indoors and outdoors. Consideration needs to be given to the pedagogical benefits of giving children regular opportunities to experience outdoor environments within school time. Also, if

children are given regular opportunities for outdoor play will they benefit automatically or is engagement in outdoor play enhanced by particular environments and reliant on the attitude and a particular type of support by practitioners? Furthermore, how might these experiences impact on the nature of pedagogy and practice in the early years?

2. *Adults and children may have different perceptions of outdoor spaces.* It is also possible that children may perceive outdoor environments differently from adults. For example, Cullen's (1993) study showed that children's use and perception of outdoor play was different from adults. Cullen argued that children perceived outdoor play as something they did without assistance of an adult and that adults were rarely seen as interacting with children in ways that would extend their skills (1993). Furthermore, research in Norway by Fjørtoft and Sageie (2000, p. 85) suggests that 'as adults we perceive the landscape as *forms*, whereas children will interpret the landscape and terrain as *functions*'. An example of this point is discussed later in this paper in relation to the 'Trampoline Tree'. Here, children's perceptions go beyond Greeno's (1994) concept of 'affordances' in their role as active meaning makers of seemingly insignificant features of the environment. Armitage (2001) has also argued that children will not necessarily use a play space that has been designated by adults for a particular play activity in the way the adults planned. Conversely children will often adopt as a play space an area that is deemed unfit for that purpose by adults. Thus children's perceptions of outdoor spaces may differ from adults in terms of both activity and interaction.
3. *Children benefit from outdoor play and learning both within the setting and outside in natural 'wild' environments.* Much of the current discourse about outdoor play in early years settings appears to be confined by a conception of the outdoor curriculum that is located within school grounds. Whilst there are many notable efforts to develop the school environment and some settings are fortunate to be able to include a range of features and terrain (including woodland) within their setting—is this ever enough? For young children to fully realise the benefits of outdoor play and learning, they need regular opportunities to experience wild outdoor environments as part of the school curriculum as well. As Callaway (2005) for example has shown, natural environments afford different possibilities from those located within school grounds. The concept of 'children's spaces' proposed by Moss and Petrie (2002) is significant here (see Waller, 2006, for a more detailed discussion of this point). For Moss and Petrie, space concerns both physical locality *and* social and cultural practices involving meaning making and relationships. Within children's spaces, there is therefore recognition of the need for privacy and to create opportunities and environments where children have freedom to play away from adults. In particular, Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that children's spaces such as outside environments allow children to exercise agency, to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning making, which may or may not involve them engaging with adults.
4. *The role of the practitioner in outside environments is not clear.* A concept of outdoor spaces for children that affords them some private space free from adult intrusion

(Cullen, 1993) suggests a multiple role for practitioners (Aasen & Waters, 2006). The 'Effective provision of pre-school education' (EPPE; Sylva *et al.*, 2003) research identified a key role for practitioners to engage in 'sustained shared thinking' with young children and it may be that outdoor spaces are ideal contexts for this type of interaction. According to Siraj-Blatchford (2004, p. 147), sustained shared thinking involves 'episodes in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend narratives etc. During a period of sustained shared thinking both parties contributed to the thinking and developed and extended the discourse'. It is possible that the space and time afforded in large outside spaces provides greater opportunity for sustained shared thinking than inside the classroom. As the 'Researching effective pedagogy in the early years research report' (REPEY) found, sustained shared thinking was much more likely to happen when children were interacting 1:1 with an adult or with another child (peer) and that freely chosen play activities often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children's thinking (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). However, whilst the REPEY and EPPE research promotes a concept of pedagogy in which the 'instructive' role of the practitioner is the crucial aspect of a child's learning, a broader social conception of sustained shared thinking is suggested in this paper.

It is argued here that an 'enabling environment' (DfES, 2007) involves opportunities for engagement in both sustained shared thinking and private space for children. Giving children regular access to wild natural environments is one factor but what actually happens when they are in these environments is also important. The role of the early years practitioner clearly involves both sensitive intervention as above and allowing children freely chosen activities without any intervention (Sylva *et al.*, 2003; Sylva & Pugh, 2005). Questions remain about how practitioners are trained for this role in outdoor environments. Although Rickinson *et al.* (2003) conducted a review of research on outdoor learning, there has been very little published research on this area. As Fjørtoft (2001) and Waite *et al.* (2006) point out, there has been limited research on how natural spaces function as a learning environment for young children and there needs to be much further reported research of what actually happens in these environments. Also, Aubrey *et al.* (2002) identify a need for early years research to be located both within settings and in areas outside educational establishments. The project reported in this paper starts to address these perceived gaps.

The Outdoor Learning Project (OLP)

Research for the OLP takes place in two different early years settings in the UK, one in England and one in Wales. The project started in January 2004 in Setting 1 and expanded in September 2005 to include Setting 2.

Setting 1. The project is based at a state nursery school located in a (mixed) housing estate on the outskirts of a large town in the English midlands area of the UK.

Children (aged three and four years) attend the nursery on a part-time basis (40 in the morning and 40 in the afternoon). The school follows the statutory Foundation Curriculum (QCA, 2000). Children normally attend for one year and then transfer to the reception class of a local primary school. Staff includes a headteacher, class teacher, three nursery nurses and three learning support assistants. There is a base ratio of one practitioner to 10 children and the children are organised into 'key groups' of around 14.

Outdoor learning is an integral part of the curriculum, and the large garden area is open for the children to use freely for all but the very beginning and end of sessions. The Country Park used for the project has elements of a 'natural wild environment'. The park is built around an Edwardian reservoir and arboretum, and below the reservoir dam is an area of approximately 52,000 square meters containing woods, open grassland, a purpose-built children's play area on sand, an amphibian pond and a butterfly garden. Visits to the Country Park are undertaken on one day per week (am and pm), whatever the weather. The children are transported by bus to the park, the journey lasting approximately 15 minutes in each direction. Children are accompanied by practitioners and students allowing for a one-to-one, or one-to-two, adult-child ratio. A programme of visits is organised so that a small group of children (one 'key' group) are taken on each occasion. This allows for an appropriate level of interaction and support for the children at the park and is also designed to have a minimal impact on staffing at the nursery. Additional adults are also needed to support the collection of written observations, video and photographic evidence.

Setting 2. The project is based at a state primary school located in a community close to a town centre in south Wales. Initially 25 children in a reception class (aged four and five) participated in the research. The class follows the statutory *Desirable outcomes for children's learning* (ACCAC, 2000). In 2006, the project was expanded to include all children in the infants aged four to seven and in September 2007 will involve the whole school. Staff currently involved in the project includes the headteacher, four class teachers and four learning support assistants. The school is located in a large Victorian building on the side of a steep hill. There is a tarmac playground used by the children at break and lunch time. The playground is also built on a steep hill. In order to give the reception children more space in the playground, their morning and afternoon breaks are timetabled without the other children in the school (approximately 170 children aged 5–11 years).

The riverside woodland area used for the project has elements of a 'natural wild environment'. The woodland is adjacent to a river and areas of open meadow and is immediately below the school. However, there is a main road between the woodland and the school. In order to get to the woodland, the children walk about 1 km on the pavement and about 0.5 km along a tarmac path to the entrance. This journey is made considerably longer because of the need to cross the main road in a 'safe' place. The woodland has open access and is not maintained by the local authority, resulting in some rubbish and waste being deposited there. Children are accompanied by

practitioners and students, allowing for a one-to-one, or one-to-two, adult–child ratio. A programme of visits is organised for all children in the infant classes for one morning per week in term time.

Methods

A range of mainly qualitative data is gathered in the form of observations, video and photographic evidence and assessment of children's 'involvement levels' (Laevers, 1994) and questionnaires for parents. In addition, this study draws on the framework for listening to young children—the multi-method 'Mosaic approach' described by Clark and Moss (2001, 2005). The method uses both the traditional tools of observing children at play and a variety of 'participatory tools' with children. These include taking photographs, book making, tours of the outdoor area and map making. 'The Mosaic approach enables children to create a living picture of their lives' (Clark & Moss, 2005, p. 13). Also, part of the Mosaic approach is to involve adults gathering information in addition to perspectives from the children.

The OLP discussed in this paper adapted the Mosaic approach (described above). This model has two stages: Stage One involves children and adults in using tools to gather and document perspectives. Firstly, data collection starts with children using digital photographs and film to record their perspectives, which then became a starting point for discussion with an adult. The discussion is then recorded as a 'learning story' (Carr, 2001). 'Learning stories' are structured narrative documentation based on critical incidents of children's learning, including the child's own comments (Carr, 2001, p. 96). The child and a practitioner discuss a child's drawing, painting or photograph (i.e. a representation of the child's interest, play or activity). The discussion is then recorded by the practitioner and published alongside the image. The learning story is then used to inform planning and as record of learning. In addition, as with the Mosaic approach, data involving adult perspectives is collected through observations, interviews with practitioners, research reviews and questionnaires for parents. In Stage Two, the information gathered is reviewed and reflected on for action (Clark & Moss, 2005).

Ethics

In the initial design of the project, as would be expected, careful reference was made to ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004) to consider the balance of harm and effect on the children, confidentiality and issues of informed consent (Alderson, 1995). Reference was also made to the principles and ethical guidance developed by the National Children's Bureau (2002, 2003) applying particularly to research with children. Similar methods have been used in both settings. The initial findings from the project were reported by Waller *et al.* (2004) and further papers on the methodology and ethics were given (Waller, 2005a, b) and young children's geographical literacy (Waller, 2005c). Also in Waller (2006), a critical discussion of participatory methods is offered.

Findings

A wide range of data has been generated from a variety of sources during the first four years of the project. The research design allows for the recognition and consideration of multiple perspectives from children, parents and practitioners, as discussed above. However, it is the intention in this paper to focus the evaluation and analysis on pedagogy and the role of the early years practitioner.

Selected children's themes and enduring shared narratives

Once at the Country Park or riverside woodland, the children's observed themes and patterns of play (video and photographic evidence, written observations and research diary) involved climbing trees, collecting fir cones and other natural objects, exploring the woods, running along the path (Setting 2), around the top of a small circular wall above a concrete-covered underground water chamber (Setting 1), playing with sticks and playing in the mud! Not all children chose all of these activities, but most tended to repeat familiar activities on each visit. Quite often, the children used the environment as a context for their imaginative play involving themes such as dinosaurs or 'goblins' (Setting 1) and 'Swamp Monsters' (Setting 2).

A similar pattern was observed in the both settings. On the first visit, the children predictably tended to stay together with the adults, spending time exploring a relatively narrow area. After the first visit, the children tended to split into small groups immediately on arrival and go to different parts of the park or woodland. Once more familiar with the outdoor environment, children recorded image-based data revealing an interesting range of both 'social spaces' and 'individual landmarks' (Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005). As the visits increased, children re-visited and named familiar places—'The Octopus Tree', 'Eeyore's Den', the woods, 'The Top of the World', 'The Giant's Bed' (of leaves), 'The Goblin's House' and 'Dragonfly Land' (Setting 1) and 'Morgan's Mountain', the 'Crocodile Tree', 'The Giant's Den', 'The Trampoline Tree' and 'The Troll Bridge' (Setting 2). Whilst both outdoor environments have open access to the public, on many occasions, especially in the winter months, there were no other visitors at the same time, allowing children complete freedom of the space. Two examples are now given to illustrate the development of children's sustained activities and narratives.

'The Trampoline Tree'. As a group of children and adults walked along the path in through the riverside woodland, on first visit they came to a fallen tree that had blocked the path. The first adult walked around the tree and started a discussion with other adults as to how the tree had fallen. The children stopped to play on the tree. They found that the lower branches were ideal for bouncing on whilst holding onto a higher branch. Rosalynn named this 'The Trampoline Tree'. Thereafter the children stopped regularly to bounce on the tree and, as their confidence grew, climb higher up the tree. In some visits, a number of children spent most of their time on these activities. All the children identified the tree on their maps of the riverside woodland.

'*The Swamp Monster with 18 heads*'. On the path leading to the woodland, shortly before 'Morgan's mountain', there was a rock face above the path, often with water dripping out of cracks. On some visits the water was just a trickle, but it became a waterfall in heavy rain and turned to icicles in freezing conditions. Underneath the rock face was a deep narrow pool of water with thick mud around the edge. This area was named the Muddy Swamp and became home to the 'Swamp Monster with 18 heads'.

The following extracts are taken from field notes over a number of visits to the riverside woodland:

2nd February

Nathan: Look at the swamp. Who lives in there? It must be the Swamp Monster. He has 18 heads and is green.

Sian (practitioner): Oh really! He must like living in the mud then.

Nathan: This mud is really deep (he put his Wellington boot into the mud). And he has 18 eyes and lots of arms and legs. I am not going to go in there he might get me (withdraws boot from the mud). Everyone, everyone run there is a Swamp Monster in here!

This narrative was developed back at school through the publication of pedagogical documentation over the following week.

16 February

Amanda: I got stuck in the mud last week—it (the Swamp Monster) was biting my leg—you should have seen my face!

4 March

Morgan (standing on the edge of the pool, placing a stick in the water and pulling it out, as if measuring the depth): I am fishing for the Swamp Monster. Its 200 (deep). (He then threw a rock into the mud and it sank immediately.) How did that happen? The Swamp Monster has eaten it.

In this scenario, Nathan's original idea was taken up by the other children and the narrative developed over a number of weeks, both in the outdoor environment and the classroom, where the imaginative play area became 'The Swamp Monster's House' and a model of the Swamp Monster was constructed in the woods by children and adults. On one occasion, the children found a shopping trolley in the woods and filled it with rubbish—'the Swamp Monster's food'.

Practitioners' perspectives

Collaborative reviews and individual interviews with practitioners undertaken in February, April and June 2004, 2005 and 2006 showed that, at first, there was a

tendency to focus concern on safety, involving some direction of the children. As the practitioners (and children) became more confident in the outdoor environment, practitioners commented on the opportunities for more 'quality time' with children. They felt that this involved the possibility of uninterrupted communication and time for a response by both parties. Of particular note here was that, in reviews in both settings, practitioners observed that in the outdoor space the children waited for the adult response and seemed to know that they would get one. However, the practitioners noted that this feature of adult-child interaction was far less apparent inside the classroom. Thus opportunities for prolonged conversation and 'sustained shared thinking' with children and observation increased. As a result, the practitioners identified an improved knowledge and understanding of each child as a significant benefit of the project. The staff in Setting 1 also found that children chose to be outside in all weathers more often once they had been involved in the project—many choosing to play outside in the rain when they would not previously have done so. A further, if somewhat unexpected benefit, was seen to be the enjoyment of the adults involved. They commented that they really looked forward to the days when the project took place and being able to be outside.

Discussion

In the examples reported above, children and adults regularly visited a natural environment with no pre-planned curriculum objectives or outcomes. Discussion here is related particularly to the implications for pedagogy in the early years. As with Alexander (2000, p. 540), pedagogy is taken to mean the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it.

Soler and Miller (2003, p. 66) argue that the Foundation Stage curriculum in England is 'an example of a centralised competency orientated curriculum with a view of the child as a future pupil' and therefore promoting a rather narrow instrumental pedagogy in which play has been marginalised. A rather different and alternative view of pedagogy has been constructed in the OLP. Through exploration and play in the OLP, the children developed themes associated with particular physical objects or spaces. The children's narratives were supported and co-constructed by other children and adults and confirmed through the publication of pedagogical documentation. This approach is consistent with Jordan's model of co-construction where intersubjectivity is developed through adults sharing their own ideas with children to extend their current interests, 'valuing and giving voice to children's activities, respectfully checking that a child would like the offered assistance' (2004, p. 41). The discursive spaces developed within the OLP involving action determined through negotiation and shared meanings around the participatory documentation were also ideal contexts for sustained shared thinking. However, there is a risk of focusing solely on an individual construction of learning and not the wider collaborative experience and shared construction of meaning. Soler and Miller (2003) and Cullen (2004) remind us of the dangers of being overly influenced by individualistic developmental tradition within ECEC. Here, Jordan (2004, p. 42)

makes an important distinction between scaffolding and the co-construction of learning, which could also be applied when co-construction is contrasted with sustained shared thinking:

the language of co-construction of learning generally has no prescribed content outcomes (the teacher has no specific direction of the learning in mind); the focus is on developing shared meanings/intersubjectivity, and each participant contributing to the ongoing learning experiences from their own expertise and points of view.

The publication of pedagogical documentation enabled all those involved in the OLP to suggest developments and alternatives in the shared narratives. A crucial factor in the construction of these narratives is the reification of shared knowledge. Cowie and Carr (2004) draw on Wenger (1998) who describes this process of documentation as an example of 'reification': informal practice that has been concretised or reified (making public, making concrete). Not only are children's ideas reified and legitimated through the co-construction of meaning but, as Cowie and Carr (2004) point out, in a learning community in which they fully participate, children behave and act in competent ways. In this context, as Wenger (1998) suggests, children can handle themselves competently. They experience competence and are recognised as competent. Claxton and Carr (2004) argue that not only participation but also both the learning environment and what teachers do include reification. Significantly, Wenger (1998) contends that in an education programme that affords the negotiation of meaning these two processes of participation and reification need to be in balance.

Therefore, a broader social conception of sustained shared thinking has evolved: one where practitioners co-construct knowledge with a group of children. Through the process of 'letting go' and handing over the curriculum in the park to the children, a 'role reversal' (Clark & Moss, 2005) has taken place. As Clark and Moss (2005, p. 81) put it 'children are the ones with the unique knowledge to impart and debate with adults'. As a result, the status of children's knowledge is raised. The recognition and acceptance of this position has required the development of new ways of investigating and communicating children's perspectives, in addition to a change in power relationships. This pedagogy gives children the opportunity to play a central role in revealing their own priorities for interpretation with adults. Wider issues are raised here about whose agenda is followed.

Aasen and Waters (2006) argue that because of the emphasis on 'well-being' and play, the proposed Foundation Phase requires teachers to take on board children's views and facilitate participation, moving away from traditional developmental models where children are measured against a predetermined set of criteria. Aasen and Waters suggest that the implication for practitioners is that they need to act and think in fundamentally different ways, moving from a concern about '*what* we do to *how* we do it' (2006, p. 126), thus identifying a key difference between the outcomes-driven EYFS in England and a more process-led Foundation Phase in Wales. There is the possibility of an alternative conception of early years pedagogy. An approach where we 'come to know about children's lives' by evolving a space where children

can engage in play that is meaningful to them, whilst at certain times adults may also learn from children without a formalised agenda. In this space we can learn from the meanings that children ascribe to their different environmental experiences, e.g. the 'Trampoline Tree' and the 'Swamp Monster, as discussed over.

The implications of this position for early years practice are that children are given opportunities ('spaces') to play and engage as social actors in their own right. Moss and Petrie (2002) have challenged early years practitioners and policy makers to reconceive provision for young children. They argue that as children have equal status and ownership of their environment the notion of 'children's services' should be replaced by 'children's spaces'. The experience of this OLP suggests that natural (wild) outdoor environments can be developed as appropriate 'children's spaces' because within this space activities and culture are created by the children themselves (Moss & Petrie, 2002). In these 'children's spaces' pedagogy and research take on different forms as children and adults co-construct knowledge together, enjoying and learning from, and with, the outdoor environment. As a consequence, the distinction between education and the research process becomes blurred as children shape their own learning.

A dilemma of power is apparent through adult control of the children's engagement in the pedagogical process. However, the concept of children's spaces advocated by Moss and Petrie raises the possibility of enabling both children and adults to be 'governed less by power, to be critical thinkers and to do so in interaction with others' (2002, p. 111), evoking an interdependency as suggested by Jans (2004). What occurs in children's spaces is therefore defined by the ethos and style of interaction between adults and children. As Waller (2006) argues, rather than just thinking about engaging children's views to influence curriculum planning and design (and the corresponding danger of instrumentalising children's play), we need to rethink participation also in terms of 'spaces for childhood' within which children can exercise their agency to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning making, which may or may not involve them engaging with adults.

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the inter-relationship between children's use of outdoor spaces and early years pedagogy. Drawing on evidence from an ongoing project, it has also started to demonstrate the significant benefits of outdoor learning for both adults and children with particular reference to the Foundation Stage in England and the Foundation Phase in Wales.

An outdoor pedagogy has evolved during the first four years of the project, which has involved recognition that meaningful early years practice requires a cultural shift from one-off listening events to a sustainable participatory culture with children, leading to the construction of knowledge through shared reflection and collaborative enquiry. The implications for the Foundation Stage and Foundation Phase are that the role of early years practitioner in both indoor and outdoor environments is complex and multiple. As, Moss and Petrie contend, working in children's spaces

involves ‘a re-conceptualization of the role of workers with children and methods of working’ (2002, p. 111). In this role, staff are reflective practitioners, thinkers, researchers and co-constructors of knowledge with children.

The paper has argued that there is a need to problematise restrictive notions of a competency based curriculum and teacher led interaction and has advanced a broader social conception of sustained shared thinking; one where practitioners co-construct knowledge with a group of children. There is a need for much further reported research into early years pedagogy (both indoors and outdoors) and the role of the practitioner, particularly to support the new developments within the Foundation Phase (Aasen & Waters, 2006) involving outdoor play and learning.

Experiences of the OLP suggest that early years practitioners should recognise the significant potential of outdoor learning and, in addition to developing outside play opportunities within their school grounds; they should also consider giving children regular opportunities to experience wild natural environments. Children will of course benefit from the opportunity to play regularly in pleasant outside environments located within school grounds but the danger is that these spaces may become institutionalised and adult dominated in the same way as inside the classroom. In both these contexts, it appears that practitioner’s attitudes and dispositions towards the shared construction of learning are key factors.

Note on contributor

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