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Child-initiated learning, the outdoor environment and the ‘underachieving’ child

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The Foundation Phase for Wales advocates an experiential, play-based approach to learning for children aged three to seven years that includes child-initiated activity within the outdoor environment. In previous research, Foundation Phase practitioners maintained that children perceived to be ‘underachieving’ within the classroom came into their own when engaged in child-initiated learning outdoors. This study, which involved eight Foundation Phase teachers, aimed to explore these perceived differences as well as teachers’ perceptions of ‘underachievement’. It is concluded that the more natural outdoor spaces in which child-initiated activity took place appeared to amplify the effects of child-initiated learning and diminish the perception of underachievement; that engagement in this project enabled some teachers to see ‘underachievement’ as being distributed across people, place and activity; and that through constructing the outdoor ‘space’ as a ‘place’ embedded with positive meanings, children may have had the opportunity to reconstruct themselves as strong, competent children rather than as ‘underachieving’ pupils.

Keywords: Foundation Phase; underachievement; child-initiated learning; the outdoor environment

Introduction

Following devolution in 1999, the National Assembly for Wales (now the Welsh Government) set out its proposals for a Foundation Phase (National Assembly for Wales 2001, 2003). Drawing on evidence of ‘good practice’ across Europe and beyond – with particular reference to programmes in New Zealand (Te Whāriki), Scandinavia and Reggio Emilia in northern Italy – it was maintained that the adoption of an overly formal curriculum and extensive formal teaching before the age of six or seven, particularly an over-emphasis on making children read and write before they are ready to do so, can result in some children attaining lower standards in the longer term (NAfW 2003).

The current Foundation Phase framework (DCELLS 2008) thus advocates a holistic, experiential and play-based approach to learning for children aged three to seven years. The framework emphasises the centrality of the child and the significance of children’s personal/social development and well-being and maintains there should be

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a ‘balance’ of practitioner-led and child-initiated activities undertaken within stimulating indoor and outdoor environments (DCELLS 2008). This being the case, Foundation Phase practitioners should allow time for, and find ways of supporting, child-initiated learning outdoors.

The research reported in this paper built on the findings of two previous projects which, given the new challenges of the Foundation Phase framework, focused on ‘projects’ inspired by the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (that is, child-initiated learning) and/or the use of the outdoor environment by early years teachers (Maynard and Chicken 2010; Maynard, Waters, and Clement 2013a). In both of these projects teachers noted that child-initiated learning and/or the outdoor environment appeared to have a positive effect on children who were seen as ‘underachieving’ in the classroom setting. That is, shy children were more confident and became leaders; boisterous or aggressive children became calmer and more focused; and those who were ‘less academically able’ often experienced success.

The project described here resulted from our desire to work with a group of Foundation Phase teachers in order to explore this issue in more depth. The main aims of this project were: to find out whether child-initiated learning outdoors did have any effect on children who were perceived by their teachers to be ‘underachieving’ and if so, the extent, nature and possible reasons for this effect. However, we also wanted to support teachers in critically reflecting on their own judgements and expectations of children and the potential impact of this. A further aim of this project, then, and the focus of this paper, was to explore teachers’ perceptions of ‘underachievement’.

The Foundation Phase

As indicated above, the Foundation Phase framework (DCELLS 2008) and supporting documentation (e.g. DCELLS 2008a, 2008b) emphasise the importance of children’s play and first-hand experiences and the need for practitioners to support and extend these. The documentation also promotes an underpinning developmental approach: it is maintained that practitioners should identify and plan activities that are appropriate to individual children’s stage of development/learning. Within the documentation, development is seen as essentially linear although not tied to chronological age: it is recognised that there will be variations in rate of progress within and across all areas of development/learning. Further while observation may focus on monitoring children’s social interactions or dispositions to learning, the main purpose of observation is to identify where children are and move them along the ‘learning continuum’ (DCELLS 2008c, 6).

The Foundation Phase thus adopts a fairly traditional view of development; an approach which, Anning, Cullen, and Fler (2009) maintain, is embedded within the institutionalised thinking of early childhood education in the UK and elsewhere. Traditional developmental approaches, it is suggested, tend to place children who do not meet expected developmental markers as somehow deficit or ‘underachieving’.

Sociocultural approaches to learning and development

In more recent years, early childhood educational research has tended to shift towards a consideration of the significance of sociocultural perspectives on

development and learning (e.g. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999). Sociocultural or sociocultural-historical theory (Anning et al. 2009) incorporates a broad range of theories that resonate with Vygotskian or neo-Vygotskian ideas. These theories propose that development and learning are embedded within particular social, cultural and historical contexts (see for example, Carr 2001).

Rather than seeing development as something internal, as belonging to the child, then, there is an emphasis on interaction *between* the child and his or her social and cultural context with development taking place through the child's participation in the activities of his/her cultural community (Anning et al. 2009, 7). As Cowie and Carr (2009, 105) note, development and learning are not, primarily, individual achievements but are 'distributed over, stretched across, people, places and things (Perkins 1993; Salomon 1993)'. Cowie and Carr (2009) argue that, this being the case, assessment of children's learning and development should similarly be distributed across people (e.g. practitioners and other adults, peers and families; relationships, expectations and intuitions; goals and prior knowledge); places (e.g. features of the indoor and outdoor context, atmosphere and structures); and things (e.g. artefacts and materials) (Anning et al. 2009, 105). In this way, assessment – and this includes observation of children's achievement – is not 'objective and exclusive' but 'subjective and inclusive' (Fleer and Richardson 2009, 133).

The Foundation Phase and child-initiated learning

It was noted above that the philosophy and practices of the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia were cited within the Foundation Phase consultation document (NAfW 2003). According to the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, the relationships, communications and interactions children have with their parents, other children and teachers are at the heart of the teaching and learning process (Rinaldi 1998). These relationships form a 'partnership of learning' (Gandini 1993, 06); children, practitioners and the wider community become co-constructors of meaning in the learning process. Children are viewed as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent' (Malaguzzi 1993, 10) and as active participants in their own socialisation and knowledge-building (Rinaldi 1998). For Reggio pedagogues, engaging in a 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi 2006) is a core element of their practice and closely linked to the documentation of children's learning processes and strategies.

To an extent, these ideas are reflected in the particular interpretation of 'child-initiated activity' within the Foundation Phase documentation: that is, as free, spontaneous play within a structured learning environment with the adult acting as facilitator (DCELLS 2008a; DCELLS 2008b). In summary, this activity is both child-initiated and child-led. According to the documentation, however, structured educational play that is initiated by practitioners may also be child-led. Here the adult may act as facilitator or, for example, may guide, scaffold or model. Importantly, while the adult may have specific planned learning outcomes, children are not made to pursue an activity and should be allowed to develop their own ideas (DCELLS 2008a; DCELLS 2008b) (see Maynard et al. 2013).

The Foundation Phase and the outdoor environment

As noted above, the Foundation Phase Framework (DCELLS 2008) also supports the use of the outdoor environment. Research on outdoor play within early years

educational settings often highlights the significance of freedom and space that outdoor environments – and particularly natural green environments – tend to afford. For example, it is maintained that outdoors children are able to move more freely, play on a larger scale and experience at first hand the world around them (Rivkin 1995; Bilton 2002; Ouvry 2003). Ouvry (2003) suggests that outside children have the space to engage in a deeper level of fantasy play and to develop positive dispositions for learning such as resilience, playfulness and reciprocity; this is particularly the case when such play allows for opportunities for risk-taking (Stephenson 2003; Sandseter 2007, 2009; Tovey 2007). The opportunity to move away from confrontation also means that when outdoors children are less likely to show signs of frustration (Ouvry 2003).

It is maintained, also, that adults appear to relate differently to children when outdoors and have different expectations – they are more relaxed (Maynard et al. 2013b): this means children are more able to push the boundaries of who they are and what they can do, without fear of being admonished for being too boisterous, loud or messy (Bilton 2002; Ouvry 2003). Other researchers have focused more specifically on: the physical benefits to be gained from outdoor play – e.g. improved motor fitness, balance and coordination (Fjørtoft 2004); the social benefits deriving from negotiating the meaning of non-specific loose parts in their play (e.g. Trawick-Smith 1994); or the emotional benefits resulting from the restorative and calming qualities of ‘green’ environments (Kaplan 1995; Wells and Evans 2003).

Methods

The project involved eight early years teachers (of children aged four to seven years) working in eight schools in two local authorities in South Wales. The project schools had been selected by the local authorities who were also the project funders. As in the previous two projects that explored child-initiated learning (Maynard and Chicken 2010; Maynard et al. 2013a), this study adopted a loosely based action research approach. Each of the selected schools was given funding to provide supply cover for the participating teacher to attend meetings, to collect data within their settings and to complete a reflective journal and final project report.

The project, which took place over one school year, was divided into three phases. In phase one the teachers attended three project meetings at which we explored a range of issues, tests and measures related to ‘expert’, research-led constructions of ‘quality’ (e.g. the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Curricular Extension (ECERS-E), Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart 2006) as well as the potential benefits and limitations of the outdoor environment. In this phase each teacher identified six children who they perceived to be ‘underachieving’: our concern here was not with children who were designated as ‘low achievers’ in relation to assessed attainment, but with those who were experiencing difficulties relative to other children in the class (see Plewis 1991). The teachers therefore each selected a boy and a girl who broadly fitted into one of three categories of ‘underachievement’ drawn from our previous projects: ‘social difficulties’¹ (e.g. who found it hard to relate to other children); ‘emotional difficulties’ (e.g. who were shy or withdrawn); and difficulties with literacy and numeracy.

In the second phase of the project the teachers attended a further three meetings at which they explored approaches to collecting data ‘on’ and ‘with’ children such as the Leuven involvement scale (Laevers 1994) and the Mosaic approach (Clark

and Moss 2001). In addition, the teachers were introduced to key ideas relating to the philosophy of the preschools of Reggio Emilia. In particular, the teachers discussed child-initiated learning – for example, its significance in relation to constructions of the child and the role of the teacher as well as implications for practice. In this project we took ‘child-initiated activities’ also to incorporate those practitioner-initiated activities emerging from the children’s observed interests. In both cases, we emphasised, it was the child who should take the lead.

At this point the teachers also began to introduce child-initiated learning in the outdoor environments of their settings. The kinds of activities undertaken outdoors varied and incorporated free play with natural resources (e.g. Schools A, F and H); growing vegetables (School C); problem-solving activities such as building an enclosure for the ducks (School B); and more structured investigations – for example, of snails (School D), air/wind (School E) and flight (School G).

All the teachers had easy access to a small tarmac yard or grassed area. These were seen by the teachers as ‘outdoor classrooms’ and used for painting, sand and water play, construction activities and so on. The teachers also had access to some additional outdoor space – playing fields, vegetable gardens or common land. Three schools (A, G and H) had extensive outdoor environments incorporating different types of play equipment and different zones or natural features such as a willow tunnel and pond. However, the teachers maintained that the use of these areas was limited by difficulties with staffing and accessibility. As part of this project the teachers were encouraged to make use of natural outdoor environments away from the classroom.

In this phase the teachers began to document the responses of the target children (24 girls and 24 boys) to child-initiated learning outdoors through the development of individual, reflective case studies. It was noted that despite exploring a range of tools and measures that could have been used to collect data, the teachers maintained that observation was both more manageable and provided more useful data. Observations were generally recorded as notes, photographs and annotated pieces of work.

In phase three, the teachers continued implementing child-initiated learning outdoors and developing their case studies. They also attended a further two meetings at which they reported on and discussed their progress. Teachers disseminated their findings at a project evaluation day; these presentations provided the basis for the teachers’ final project reports.

Data collection and analysis

The research officer visited the teachers in their settings on three occasions, undertaking semi-structured interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) with each participant. Field notes (a recording of key issues discussed and what were potentially significant insights) were taken at meetings and documentary evidence collected – for example, teachers’ presentations and final reports.

Interviews with teachers were transcribed (approximately 18 hours of audio recording) and NVivo8 was used to support the thematic analysis of data (see, for example, Flick 2009). Data were analysed in three ways and in increasing depth. Initially, we collated data on all 48 target children and identified the perceived difficulties within the normal classroom context and observed behaviours when involved in child-initiated learning outside. Further analysis of data was then undertaken in relation to the individual case studies developed by teachers. As Stark and Torrance

(2008) note, case studies can be derived from medical models that emphasise the objective observer or they can be derived from the social sciences that recognise the significance of particular histories and contexts and stress the social, shared construction of meaning. In this project, the teachers' case studies all began with the former 'objective' approach although, as later described, over time this was to shift for some teachers; to a greater or lesser extent these teachers referred to their role in the construction and interpretation of 'underachievement'.

A further layer of analysis drew on theoretical ideas relating to 'place' and 'space' and on Foucauldian theory as a way of interpreting and making sense of this emergent finding. It was noted that the school has been identified as one of the 'everyday spaces in and through which children's identities and lives are made and remade' (Holloway and Valentine 2000, 11). Within the literature, however, the definition of, and distinction between, space and place is often unclear. Although it is generally recognised that both 'space' and 'place' are socially constructed (Cresswell 2004) and relational (Massey 2005), Tuan, a humanistic geographer, maintains that an environment we have not experienced is undifferentiated; it is a 'blank space' until we 'endow it with value' (Tuan 1977, 6). Tuan (1977) maintains that we give a 'place' meaning and become connected and attached to it through lived experience. Resonating with sociocultural theories, Anderson and Jones (2009, 293) refer to the work of Casey who maintains that place and self are mutually constructive: 'there is no place without self and no self without place' (2001, 684).

Cresswell (2009) notes that while humanistic geographers emphasise the role of experience in the creation of place, they have been criticised for not having much to say about its relationship with power and how the meanings of places may be resisted. De Certeau (1984), for example, differentiated between 'strategic spatial practices' associated with institutions and with structures of power and control – and, in relation to this, tactical spatial practices – the ways in which individuals move through these places in unintended ways. For de Certeau, then, place represents how things are meant to be – place gives rise to the 'law of the proper' (1984, 117) – whereas space is how that place is actually lived and used – it is 'practiced place' (1984, 117).

While de Certeau focused on resistance, Foucault was more concerned with the distribution and circulation of power. As Maynard (2007) notes, Foucault saw power not as something owned by individuals but as dispersed and circulating throughout societies, silently flowing through a network of social relations and practices (Foucault 1977). Thus, while we are all governed we also govern ourselves and to a greater or lesser extent govern others (Dahlberg et al. 1999).

The circulation of power is supported by the 'distribution of individuals in space' (Foucault 1977, 141). Within school 'enclosures' teachers and pupils are distributed between different 'cells' (classrooms) and their use of time and space is regulated through the use of timetables. Maynard (2007) notes that both teachers and pupils are subject to 'hierarchical observation' (Foucault 1997): teachers watch pupils but are themselves watched by headteachers, inspectors and parents. Foucault maintained that it is the *possibility* of being seen at all times that is enough to ensure control is maintained: the all-seeing, authoritative, normalising gaze is turned inwards and used by individuals to observe, evaluate and regulate their own behaviour.

The idea of 'discourse' is also important here. Danaher, Schirato, and Webb (2000) note that society is divided into many social and cultural fields (e.g. education)

and that each field speaks to itself and of itself through ‘discourses’: particular and shared languages, meanings and practices. Those discourses that are officially sanctioned by institutions – such as the traditional discourse of child development – ‘resonate more powerfully in and through us’ (MacNaughton 2005, 29) and form ‘regimes of truth’ that govern what are held to be ‘normal and desirable ways to think, act and feel’ (MacNaughton 2005, 32). However, it is maintained that we can resist the practices of power and normalisation (Danaher et al. 2000), and we can destabilise officially sanctioned truths (MacNaughton 2005). That is, through making visible, deconstructing, problematising and questioning dominant discourses and the constructions and practices they produce it is possible to create spaces ‘in which alternative discourses and constructions can be produced’ (Dahlberg et al. 1999, 34).

Ethical issues

Ethical issues were discussed throughout the project: this was seen as particularly important given the focus on the ‘underachieving’ child. The teachers reported that all the target children had been asked if they wanted to be included in their ‘special project’ but that as child-initiated learning outdoors was part of the Foundation Phase framework they did not feel it necessary to seek their parents’ permission. The teachers also maintained that as children were routinely observed in the classroom for assessment purposes they were confident that the target children would not feel ‘singled out’ or view their involvement in a negative way. Indeed, the main concern noted by several of the teachers was that other children may feel excluded from this project; in some settings, therefore, while teachers retained a particular focus on observing the target children, they involved the whole class in child-initiated learning outdoors.

Findings

Observed differences

In the case studies of at least 28 of the 48 target children the teachers stated that, compared with their behaviour when undertaking ‘normal’ classroom activity – which, they acknowledged, tended to be practitioner-directed – positive differences had been observed when the children were engaged in child-initiated learning outdoors. The teachers commented, for example:

In the classroom [EmotG] gets upset easily and sulks. She has mood swings and wants her own way. Outdoors she indicates a positive response to being in control of her learning. There is increased concentration on task and increased engagement and enjoyment. There is a willingness to help others and share ideas. (Teacher E)

Indoors [SocB] finds it hard to stop talking and to take turns, play cooperatively, share, concentrate or to conform. With child-led learning he remains focused and perseveres on a range of tasks. It has a positive impact on his whole demeanour. He co-operates and socialises well there is a more positive relationship with adults. Outside he listens more carefully ... there are less squabbles and he is more manageable. (Teacher E)

[CogG] has poor concentration, sees herself as the baby, finds it difficult to sit and listen to story. She is extremely lacking in confidence ... shy ... she won’t look at you indoors.

With child-led learning she is totally engrossed and remains on task. Outside is the best learning environment for her ... she remains on task. When outside she will come over and say 'I like this' and 'I like doing that', 'this is my favourite place'. (Teacher C)

These 28 children – 14 boys and 14 girls – had a range of perceived (dominant) difficulties – for 10 children they were 'emotional'; for nine they were 'social' and for a further nine they related to the learning of literacy and/or numeracy.

There were indications that the extent of the differences reported appeared, in part, to be related to the perceptions and expectations of individual teachers: for example, Teacher C was emphatic that significant differences were apparent in the behaviour of five of the six target children while other teachers (e.g. B and D) appeared more tentative, maintaining the positive differences they had observed were more subtle or partial.

No judgement/unspecified

In relation to the remaining 20 target children, there were 17 about whom teachers did not make any specific judgements in their final project reports. In these case studies, teachers tended to comment more generally on observed differences between children engaged in child-initiated learning outdoors compared with normal indoor activity: while most of their comments were positive they were not specifically related to a target child. Other than Teacher A, all the teachers included at least one case study of this kind while Teacher G made no clear judgement in relation to any of the target children.

No difference

In the final three case studies, the teachers made a clear and emphatic statement that no positive difference had been observed when children were engaged in child-initiated learning outdoors. The three children all had multiple, severe difficulties: teachers referred to issues related to the children's developmental difficulties or to their challenging home circumstances. For example:

This child is very reluctant to participate in any learning activities. He cannot count objects up to three and shows little recognition of colour and rhyme. He is reluctant to socialize with the adults and never approaches them: he doesn't bother with us inside, he doesn't bother with us outside. He just wants to do his own thing.... (Teacher D, Cog-b)

Reasons for the observed differences

In the project meetings the teachers considered the possible reasons for the differences they had observed; they were also asked to consider this in their final reports. Initially the teachers maintained that these differences were related in some way either to the outdoor environment or to engagement in child-initiated learning.

Outdoor environment

The teachers commented that simply being outdoors appeared to calm some children and to stimulate and excite others. Observed differences were seen to relate to the flexibility and increased space afforded by these environments. Teacher C maintained, for example, that it was a more appropriate context for children who

were 'active' or 'more of a free spirit'; Teacher E similarly noted that one of the target children (cog-b) 'has a very large personality that is sometimes difficult to contain in the classroom' and that this often led to 'demonstrations of frustration'.

The teachers also suggested that when outdoors children may feel less constrained by their teachers: children could more easily keep out of their earshot and line of sight and away from their reach. This may also have enabled children more easily to move away from others when at risk of, or involved in, confrontation and conflict (teachers C, E, F and G) so supporting (the appearance of) greater collaboration.

Teacher C maintained that children may feel happier outdoors as this space was associated with fun and play – 'we work in class and play outdoors', while Teacher A suggested that the outdoor environment was not 'tainted by failure' as the classroom may be: this teacher noted, 'indoors children have often decided what they can and cannot do'. Teacher B similarly suggested that for the target children in particular, 'outdoors, it was more like being given a fresh start ... or a blank canvas'. Other teachers indicated that children's increased happiness and confidence may be related to their perceptions of themselves as learners in relation to their peers: that 'outside [he] is more on an equal footing with other children' (teacher D; soc-b) and that 'outdoors [he] was able to show and share his expertise with other children' (teacher E; cog-b).

Child-initiated learning

Differences were also attributed to the kinds of activities and experiences undertaken outdoors: the physical space affording opportunities for more practical, hands-on, problem-solving activities. Four of the teachers (B, C, E and G) noted that this meant that the children tended to work on a bigger scale – activities centred on the use of gross motor skills. Such activities, it was suggested, may have 'masked' difficulties with fine motor skills that were made visible within the classroom when children were asked to engage in more formal literacy tasks. This masking effect was also noted in relation to behaviour: Teacher B commented that in the classroom one of the target children (Cog-b) found it difficult to wait for other children to take their turn when working in larger group activities. When engaged in child-initiated learning outdoors he tended to work with only one or two of his friends and so this difficulty was not apparent.

Most teachers (A, B, C, G and E) commented on the significance of children being given greater control of their play and learning and following their own interests. Teacher B commented that 'they can make as much or as little of it as they want to'. As a result, children were more motivated and engaged – 'totally engrossed' (Teacher C) – while the frustration and negative behaviour demonstrated when children were faced with teacher-directed activity in the classroom – particularly activity that these children found challenging – was less likely to occur. At the same time, being in control of their activity meant that the target children became more collaborative and more assertive: they 'asked for help in tasks not permission to do them' (Teacher A).

Changing perceptions of 'underachievement'

Over time, in the project meetings, some teachers began to consider ways in which they may have contributed to the differences they observed. For example, Teacher

B commented that ‘what counts as naughty outside is different’ and Teacher C noted that outside she allowed – or even expected – the children to ‘shout with excitement, to make a mess, and to run free’ but that this was not the case when inside the classroom.

The teachers noted that they also felt happier and more relaxed when outdoors and that the children may, in part, be responding to this. Teacher C, for example, commented that when working with children outdoors she felt less scrutinised: ‘I’m different outdoors, I am more relaxed outside ... there are no eyes outside.... Indoors I feel conditioned to be in a particular way....’ This teacher concluded: ‘The children really are perceptive to the contexts we create in the different places.’

The teachers suggested that differences may also have related to the time given to observation (for example, Teacher B) and that they had been asked to construct – to see – the child as strong and capable and to focus on, and engage in, supporting and extending children’s play and explorations. For example, Teacher D commented: ‘I suppose it’s ... I’ve underestimated some of them and you sort of label them and think ‘oh they’re not going to be able to do this’ ... and when you’re talking to them, some of the things they come up with!...’

Discussion

Resonating with the findings of our previous projects (Maynard and Chicken 2010; Maynard et al. 2013a), the teachers in this study reported that when engaged in child-initiated activity in the outdoor environment, over half of the children who in the classroom were perceived to be ‘underachieving’ appeared to behave differently: to a greater or lesser extent, their perceived ‘underachievement’ diminished. Initially these differences tended to be solely attributed to – or to the relationship between – children’s engagement in child-initiated learning and features of the outdoor environment. At a later stage, however, some teachers noted that supporting child-initiated activity and being in the outdoor environment also had an effect on them: on their expectations, feelings, actions and perceptions. It was noted that these teachers began to consider their role in the construction of under/achievement. As stated above, in order to explore these teachers’ changing construction of under/achievement, we drew on Foucauldian theory and also on Tuan (1977) and de Certeau’s (1984) work on ‘space’ and ‘place’.

The indoor ‘place’

Adopting Tuan’s perspective, the classroom would have been a ‘place’ for the children; a place which already spoke to them through its design and the objects within it (see also, Clark 2010) and which, through experience, the children had endowed with meanings for themselves as ‘pupils’. However, given they were positioned as ‘underachieving’, the meanings they gave to it, and to themselves within it, may have been negative ones.

The classroom appeared also to be a ‘place’ for the teachers; the meanings that they attributed to this ‘place’ were those of authority and control. That is, adopting a Foucauldian perspective, power and control flowed through them: they were controlled and also both controlled and regulated themselves. As Teacher C indicated, within the classroom they were ‘conditioned’ to behave in certain ways: their subjectivities as teachers were embedded within the school’s physical structure

and artefacts as well as its rules and relationships (see Maynard 2007). In line with the dominant discourse of child development, then, they ‘performed’ appropriate ways of being a teacher and interpreted their observations of children in relation to expected norms (for example, that they *should* be able to have fine motor control or they *should* wait for their turn within a large group).

From place to space: resistance and disruption

How did this differ when outdoors? The teachers indicated that, for some of the children at least, the outdoor environment was as yet uncluttered by negative emotions or meanings given that it was likely to be associated with fun, play and not work (see McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley 2011). In Tuan’s terms, while not entirely an unknown ‘space’, the children’s lack of experience within the new outdoor environments – that is, as a ‘pupil’ within these environments – may also have meant that the personal meanings attributed to these ‘spaces’ (as places) were weaker or less developed.

The outdoor environments in which child-initiated activity took place also afforded children physical space – they provided the possibility for greater movement. This meant that the children were less physically constrained; they may have used the space tactically (de Certeau 1984) and were more able to get away from conflict and demonstrate their agency. But as Tuan (1977) notes, in the Western world space signifies a ‘sense’ of freedom, the opening of possibilities. Particularly when engaged in activity that they initiated or at least led, then, the children may have felt less psychologically constrained. A ‘sense of space’ may also have been reflected in the teachers’ changed expectations and interpretations of children’s behaviour and their feelings of happiness and relaxation.

The outdoor environment was also a ‘space’ in which the children to some extent initiated and were given the opportunity to control the direction of activity so enabling them to ask and answer their own questions, contribute their particular real-world expertise and possibly to adopt their preferred relational and socially shared way of working (Singal and Swann 2011). In line with Foucauldian ideas, being outside the classroom walls children may more easily have been able to resist forms of regulation and control (Simpson 2000) while child-initiated activity may have amplified the effects of this (Maynard et al. 2013a), so supporting their demonstrations of agency. Similarly, being away from the ‘official space’ within the school – in a space ‘hidden from official discourses’ (Clark 2010, 775) – the teachers indicated that they tended to (re)position themselves more as adults than as teachers.

In Maynard et al. (2013a) we suggest that the outdoor environment may provide a particularly appropriate and supportive context for child-initiated learning both for the children and for their teachers. Supporting and observing children undertaking child-initiated learning outdoors, and reflecting on their observations within project meetings, may also have enabled some of the teachers, if only temporarily, to disrupt some of the ‘regimes of truth’ about child development that govern the field of early childhood education. Resonating with sociocultural ideas and with Foucauldian ideas of power as distributed, these teachers came to see themselves as part of – visible within – a dynamic relationship that existed not so much between ‘people, places and things’ (see Cowie and Carr 2009) but between ‘people’ (the children’s and their own individual and shared histories, constructions, perceptions, expectations, feelings, relationships and so on); the ‘activity’ (child-initiated play and learn-

ing); and the ‘space’ in which this took place (the outdoor environment and its features, artefacts, challenges, opportunities and so on).

However, Tuan argues that ‘space’ not only signifies freedom and openness but also the potential of threat (Tuan 1977). In this study the teachers reported that not all the target children enjoyed being outdoors or taking greater control of their play and learning while some teachers indicated their own discomfort with feeling ‘out of control’: it was noted that while Teacher C perceived children to be ‘running free’, others indicated their concerns about children ‘running wild’. It appeared that some teachers may have preferred not to venture too far into a ‘space’ where their authority may be challenged.

Conclusions

Three conclusions can be drawn from this project. First, and resonating with the findings of Maynard et al. (2013a) the more natural outdoor spaces in which child-initiated activity took place appeared both directly (through, for example, through the provision of space and the encouragement of activities involving gross motor skills) and indirectly (e.g. through its location outside the classroom and association with fun and play) to support and amplify the effects of child-initiated learning and to diminish (the perception of) underachievement.

Second, engagement in this project, and the sustained support the teachers received from the research team, appeared to support the disruption of the traditional and dominant discourse of child development; it helped to create a ‘space’ within which teachers had enough freedom to engage with other possibilities, other ways of being and ‘seeing’. Some but not all took up this challenge and on occasions began to write themselves into the story of children’s ‘underachievement’, seeing under/achievement as being distributed or shared across, and the result of a dynamic interaction between, people, place and activity.

Third, the study indicated that child-initiated play in the outdoor environment may not simply or solely benefit children’s physical, social, emotional or cognitive development. Rather, in constructing the outdoor ‘space’ as a ‘place’ embedded with positive meanings, the children were provided with the opportunity, in relation to their teachers, to reconstruct (reposition) themselves as strong, competent children rather than as ‘underachieving’ pupils.

Note

1. Soc-b and soc-g: boy/ girl with perceived social difficulties; emot-b and emot-g: boy/girl with perceived emotional difficulties; cog-b and cog-g: boy and girl with perceived difficulties in learning literacy or numeracy.

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