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Learning in the outdoor environment: a missed opportunity?

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In 2001, the Welsh Assembly Government announced proposals for a Foundation Phase for children aged three to seven years. The Foundation Phase framework promotes a play-based approach to children's learning in both indoor and outdoor contexts and places children's well-being and their personal and social development at its core. While the framework is currently being piloted across Wales, full implementation will not take place until 2010; for many schools, then, this is a time of transition. This paper discusses the findings of a research project that aimed to document the current use of the outdoors by a group of early years teachers working in South Wales. Drawing on data from interviews and observations conducted in four schools, it is suggested that the teachers missed many of the opportunities afforded by the outdoor environment to enhance children's learning. The paper considers the reasons why this might be the case and comments on the distinction, apparent in two schools, between what was seen as 'normal' and 'special' outdoor activity.

Keywords: *Outdoor play; Foundation Phase for Wales; Early years curriculum; Learning experiences*

Introduction

Since 1999, devolution has meant that rather than having to implement policies devised in England, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has been able to consider the kind of education system that might be appropriate to Wales. As part of this debate, a vision document for education in Wales—'The Learning Country' (WAG, 2001)—outlined plans for a fundamental review of approaches to the education of children in the early years. The subsequent proposals for a Foundation Phase (WAG, 2004, 2007) for children aged three to seven years (the new English Foundation Stage being for children from birth to five years) aimed to address the perceived over-formalization of early educational experiences and so advocates a play-based approach to children's learning in both indoor and outdoor environments and has children's well-being and their personal and social development at its core.

This being the case, whether working inside or out, there is a need for early years teachers in Wales to take seriously the development of, for example, children's

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self-confidence, independence and ability to cooperate with others. There is also a need for them to protect and strengthen children's positive dispositions to learning: those 'habits of mind' (Katz, 1999) such as curiosity and resilience. Such aims may be supported by the inclusion of child-initiated activity and opportunities for practical, experiential learning and real-life problem solving; by engaging children in 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) where meaning is jointly constructed through dialogue between adult and child, and through asking open questions (see WAG, 2004, 2007). This approach requires sensitivity and skill.

The Foundation Phase is currently being piloted in 42 settings across Wales; full implementation (for all three- to seven-year-olds) will not take place until 2010. For most early years settings in Wales, then, this is a period of transition: while guidance materials are being produced and training events staged, teachers are officially working with the previous, and arguably more prescriptive, 'Desirable Outcomes' framework (ACCAC, 2000).

This paper focuses on the current use of the outdoor environment by a group of early years teachers working in South Wales. Given the Foundation Phase proposals, the paper aims specifically to explore the teachers' views concerning the learning potential of the outdoor environment and to identify and discuss the kinds of activities and pedagogical approaches the teachers implemented when working outdoors.

Potential of the outdoor environment

Resonating with the work of early years pioneers such as Rousseau and Froebel, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in the UK in the potential of the outdoor environment for supporting children's learning (DfES, 2006). This interest can be evidenced by the growing number of reports relating to, for example, the Forest School approach (Waite *et al.*, 2006) and the development of school grounds (McKendrick, 2005). Unsurprisingly, then, outdoor learning has not only been promoted by educational policy-makers in Wales, but is also embedded within the Foundation Stage in England (DfES, 2007) where concerns have been raised regarding the appropriateness of the educational experiences offered to children in reception classes (Aubrey, 2004), particularly since the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (Wood, 2004).

According to the literature, one of the main advantages of using the outdoor environment is that it provides children with the space to move freely (Rivkin, 1995): movement, along with play, has been described as one of the most natural and powerful modes of learning for young children (Bilton, 2002). As numerous writers have noted (e.g. Rivkin, 1995; Bilton, 2002; Ouvry, 2003), when outdoors children can construct on a bigger scale, explore the world at first hand and experience natural phenomena such as the weather, the changing seasons and shadows. Ouvry (2003) maintains that in the outside environment children also have the space to engage in and develop more believable fantasy play. This may particularly be the case with boys who appear drawn to fantasy play involving superheroes (Paley,

1984), which usually involves a great deal of running and chasing. In their relationships with peers, children can more easily move away from confrontation when outside and so are less likely to show signs of frustration and lack of cooperation (Ouvry, 2003). Further, adults appear to relate differently to children in the outdoor environment. Rivkin (1998) notes that while inside children may be expected to sit still and be quiet; outside they are expected to run around and make a noise. This means that they can 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).

The natural outdoor environment

However, it is suggested that there are limitations to the highly managed and essentially risk-free play often found in school yards ('yard' is the term used in the locality to describe the school playground) and that additional benefits may be derived from play in natural outdoor environments. Stephenson (2003), for example, links young children's physical risk-taking in the outdoor environment with the potential for children to develop both confidence in themselves and the disposition to manage risk effectively. Similarly, risk-taking in natural environments has been linked to the development of children's learning paths and dispositions (Waller, 2005).

Fjortoft (2001, 2004) reports research from Scandinavia, which demonstrates that children who play in flexible, natural landscapes appear to be healthier, have improved motor fitness, balance and coordination, and demonstrate more creativity in their play. Fjortoft and Sageie (2000) point out that the natural landscape has qualities that meet children's needs for diverse and stimulating play environments: in their study children interpreted the affordances of various environmental features in different seasons and these affected the functions of children's play. For example, woodlands and cliffs were used for climbing, areas of shrubland were used for building dens and shelters, slopes were used for sliding, while open spaces were used for running and catching games. Fjortoft and Sageie (2000) emphasise that it is the actual (natural) environment that is beneficial: their research revealed that children who played in the forest tended to demonstrate better motor skills than children who played in a traditional playground.

Experiences within wild spaces are also vital to effective environmental education. The increasing interest in environmental issues has raised the profile of children's use of the outdoor space in terms of the potential for them to develop positive and caring attitudes to the wider environment (Rivkin, 2000). It has been suggested, however, that access to outdoor space is not enough to engender such attitudes (Malone & Tranter, 2003): the use and management of the outdoor space by adults is as important as access itself.

Finally, the rich, sensory, natural environment not only supports children's own investigations (Fjortoft 2004 ; Waite *et al.*, 2006) but also provides an ideal context for group activities in which the development of knowledge, concepts and skills from

across the ‘curriculum’ are embedded within authentic, purposeful and often real-life tasks—examples include building dens, creating a pond area, clearing a path through undergrowth and growing food crops.

Methodology

The study involved four primary schools in South Wales. None of these schools was involved in piloting the Foundation Phase. The aim of this research was twofold. First, we wanted to document headteachers’ and reception class teachers’ views on the use and potential of the outdoor environment. Second, we wanted to document teachers’ current practice in order to gain a ‘snapshot’ of the outdoor experiences to which children currently have access. In each school Reception class teachers were involved in order to allow some comparison between settings.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interview and direct observation. All headteachers and teachers were interviewed at the start of the project. The interviews, which were audio-recorded, followed a semi-structured schedule and focused on respondents’ rationale for their current outdoor provision. The class teachers were also observed on at least three occasions during the course of this study. The observations aimed to record normal use of the indoor and outdoor space by children during their class-time. ‘Playtimes’ (i.e. the breaks in the school day set aside for outdoor play but not considered part of the teaching day) were not observed as part of the study. Observations usually lasted between 30 and 45 minutes: the observer recorded relevant details of the context and activity and then kept a running record of the session with particular attention paid to adult–child interaction.

Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), findings from the initial interviews and observations informing later data gathering. Data were coded using relevant headings and, towards the end of the project, a framework was devised as an additional tool to support the analysis of observation data. This framework enabled us to identify and compare a range of issues relating to, for example: outcomes (whether these were predetermined, their focus, how far these were embedded in meaningful activity); organisational strategies and pedagogical approaches (including the level of child autonomy and adult–child interaction); and levels of physical activity.

Findings

Findings from the four schools (schools A, B, C and D) are summarised below.

Description of sites

Three of the four schools (A, C and D) were located in fairly similar inner-city environments where the school grounds consisted largely of tarmac yards. Of these, school A had a number of discreet outdoor areas including a tarmac reception class play area, a large tarmac playground, a small grassed area and an area of waste

ground in which a 'sensory garden' was being created. School C's site included two sloping tarmac yards which tend to be slippery when wet and a small sloping garden accessed via a locked gate from the yard area that came into use in the latter months of the project. School D had a very small tarmac yard for use by the whole school that flooded after heavy rain and a small 'quad' area which was unused at the time of the project. School B, located in a suburban area, had tarmac yards for different age groups with attached grassed areas, a small area of woodland recently cleared of undergrowth and a large school field.

Use of the outdoor environment

In all of the schools the use of the outdoors was dependent on good weather; three of the schools (A, C and D) did not use the outdoor environment from November to March. Each school made a small area of a yard available for Reception children on a basis that ranged from daily use (weather permitting) to timetabled use where children accessed the space once a week. In school B a small area of grassed space was also used if it was not wet; there was no record of the children using the cleared woodland area.

Respondents' rationale

Respondents often referred to, and appeared nostalgic about, their own experiences of the outdoors as children: for example 'the children haven't had the experiences I've had—they're closely monitored' (teacher, school C); 'children are not outdoors enough ... in my own childhood we were free to play unsupervised' (headteacher, school C). Unsurprisingly, therefore, they thought about the outdoors primarily in relation to its potential for fun, fresh air and freedom and as providing children with an opportunity to 'act as children' (headteacher, school C). Comments included, for example, 'Children like being outdoors ... they get a sense of freedom' (teacher, school A) and 'It's to do with space, fresh air, using a loud voice, running' (teacher, school D).

While the teachers maintained that they were less didactic when working outdoors—for example, 'indoors is very instructive so when you are outdoors you can enjoy the fun of work then' (teacher, school A)—they also indicated that they 'needed to be convinced' (teacher, school D) of the learning benefits of free play in the outdoor environment. As a result, although the teachers referred to 'space' and 'movement' these were not directly linked to their potential to support children's learning. In this respect the headteachers, in particular, spoke about the tensions they perceived between the move towards a play-based curriculum which involves increased use of the outdoors (and the possibility of some child-led activity) and the requirement to plan in advance and account for all the learning that takes place within the teaching time: 'if we are to develop outdoor learning, I don't like to call it outdoor play, we need to ensure there is real purpose to it' (headteacher, school D). A number of respondents also described the perceived expectations of inspectors

(ESTYN) as problematic, while for one school the possible reaction of parents was also raised as a concern: 'our parents have high expectations—they think in levels, you have to read by [the age of] five' (headteacher, school B).

Respondents referred to other concerns they held about using the outdoor environment. For example, they were worried about safety and the possibility of litigation in the event of a child being hurt. They also cited problems associated with poor weather conditions: the possibility of complaints from parents if children were taken out in the rain or if their clothes got dirty; the need for wet-weather gear for all children to use; for effective drying and storage facilities; and for a changing area in/near the classroom. For example, respondents in one school commented: 'we get complaints if their socks and shoes are wet' and 'a child has no coat today, it's really wet ... what can we do?' (teacher, school D); 'Parents do not want their children outside if it is raining' (headteacher, school D). A lack of facilities to store away outdoor equipment was also highlighted as a problem, particularly by headteachers in schools where vandalism outside school hours was seen as a real possibility.

A further difficulty cited was the ratio of children to adults: teachers indicated a need to watch children all the time and to supervise areas that could not be seen from the classroom. There appeared to be two reasons for this: to direct children's learning 'You need a member of staff ... to bring them back to the focus [of the activity] or it would be a free for all' (teacher, school D) and for safety reasons: 'you have to be so careful these days, you just want to see everything that's going on' (teacher, school A).

Activities: classroom and school yard

In their planned activities—for both the classroom and the school yard—the teachers identified specific learning goals. While occasionally the teachers also referred to broader aims such as the development of social skills, activities were predominantly focused (either directly or as part of a game) on the learning of subject content and related skills—particularly the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. For example, children were observed taking turns to sit on a bench and describe a found object and playing a counting game involving a die, frogs and lily pads (school C). One headteacher noted: 'you can take everything outdoors—carpet maths on a bigger scale, words ... you can teach the same thing but outdoors' (headteacher, school B).

Organisation of outdoor activities varied. Most commonly, teachers adopted the same pattern of working as they did inside: the teacher worked with a group of children on the main task while the others chose from (or were chosen for) a range of play-based activities such as use of the bicycles or chalking (school B).

Pedagogy: classroom and school yard

While the teachers indicated that they were unsure whether or not they should change their pedagogical approach when working outside, several indicated that they

felt more relaxed outdoors: 'in the classroom I keep a tight reign, outside there is more freedom' (teacher, school D). One headteacher stated that she hoped that working outdoors would have a positive impact on classroom practice: 'it's going to make teachers think more creatively and this might come back in the classroom' (headteacher, school D).

Observations revealed, however, that the teachers adopted similar pedagogical approaches whether working indoors or as part of 'normal' outdoor activity on the school yard: 'normal' referring to teachers' routine daily/weekly planned sessions. In these activities the teachers' attention remained centred on the focus task and they were observed instructing children, modelling skills and employing closed questioning. The only observed interaction with the other children was to comment on the product of an activity or to monitor behaviour. It was noted on two occasions in two different schools that there were a number of children who, when not working on the focus task, appeared to manoeuvre themselves so as to avoid the gaze of the teacher. Overall, the level of physical activity was low in the classroom and, when undertaking 'normal' activities outdoors, this was only marginally raised (ranging from low to intermediate).

Alternative approaches

Two of the schools developed additional, alternative approaches to using the outdoors by assigning a 'special' time in the week to this outdoor activity. Though this was organised in advance, this 'special' time was separate and different from the 'normal' outdoor activity outlined above. Teachers referred informally to these sessions being 'a time to explore and let the children take more of the initiative' (teacher, school C) and 'for the children to be able to use the space and feel more freedom' (teacher, school D). These sessions both took place on a Friday morning. In school C the teachers made use of a small garden area in the school grounds during the summer months and in School D, teachers organised parent-supported trips to the local beach.

During observations teachers in both schools directed the children in the planned tasks but allowed them to deviate from these activities and, at times, to initiate their own activity. However, the teachers did not get involved in child-initiated exploration or play, or comment upon it. The goals stated for these sessions were less closely tied to content objectives and were loosely linked to children's personal and social development, namely problem-solving and team-working. Observed activities included more authentic tasks such as den building (school C) and a challenge to lift a bucket of sand up to a platform using a rope (school D). Adult-child interaction when working in these contexts included both open and closed questions and on one occasion involved sustained shared thinking. Compared with normal indoor and outdoor activity, the role of the teachers tended to be more supportive and focused on monitoring rather than directing. Further, the level of physical activity was greater during this 'special' outdoor time than when working in the classroom or on the school yard, ranging from intermediate to high.

Discussion

While the teachers involved in this study maintained that they were making greater use of the outdoor environment than they had done in the past, it appeared that, overall, this was in a partial and limited way. The teachers went outside only in good weather and in relation to their 'normal' outdoor activity, undertook the same kinds of tasks and made use of the same pedagogical approaches as they did when working inside the classroom: predominantly teacher-directed tasks which focused on the learning of subject knowledge and basic skills. It was noted, also, that 'normal' outdoor sessions took place on the school yard: little use was made of natural environments. Further, only one respondent referred to the learning potential of play and child-initiated activity in the outdoor environment and there was little evidence of sustained shared thinking and what could be described as authentic activity—these were not part of 'normal' planned teaching.

It is important to consider the reasons why this might have been the case. First, respondents referred to a number of practical difficulties that militated against effective use of the outdoor environment: for example the size, condition and location of the outdoor space was not seen as conducive to play and learning. In addition, most teachers were working within buildings that were not designed to allow children easy access to the outside environment and which therefore did not support the idea of free-flow between the inside and outside. The use of the outdoor space was therefore normally subject to timetabling and excursions were both adult-intensive and time consuming.

Second, respondents were not fully aware of the potential uses and benefits—the affordances (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000)—of outdoor environments. This being the case, when trying to justify the inclusion of outdoor play, they referred to their own memories of childhood and romantic notions of freedom that today's children are often denied (Rivkin, 2000). Even so, observation data indicated that the teachers' 'normal' outdoor learning sessions allowed little more freedom than that of the classroom. Further, it appeared that playing in the outdoor environment was seen as having little to do with what teachers saw as their primary role: that of 'teaching' curriculum content.

Third, compared with, for example, Scandinavian countries (Einarsdottir & Wagner 2006), the outdoor environment is not a central feature of the Welsh (or UK) cultural identity. As a result, for some of the teachers the idea of being outside for an extended period of time may have been anathema. Thus, while a reluctance to allow children to go outside throughout the year and in all weathers may have been related to a lack of appropriate resources such as wet-weather wear and drying rooms, it may also have reflected a cultural resistance to the perceived discomforts of the outdoor environment and a concern to protect children, and themselves, from these discomforts.

A fourth factor relates to the issue of risk. Children living in urban areas may have outdoor access limited to brief, supervised visits to built playgrounds. Such limited access to outdoor spaces is exacerbated by a felt need to protect children from harm (Harden, 2000): both physical harm (falling out of a tree) and the harm caused by

inappropriate adults accessing children while at play—‘stranger danger’ (e.g. Harden, 2000). The cultural feature of ‘protectionism’ (Harden, 2000; Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004), which places children in a position of helplessness rather than strength, was apparent in the teachers’ stated need to see the children at all times. This was commonly quoted as a reason for not making more use of the outdoor environments although teachers also informally referred to their concerns about a growing culture amongst the parent body of blame and litigation.

A fifth reason why respondents may have been missing opportunities to support children’s learning in the outdoor environment relates to current early years education policy in Wales. While there is a desire to introduce more informal and play-based approaches to learning, the teachers in this study held a clear view of the role of the teacher and of the child that reflected the high priority given to content-based learning: factual knowledge and basic skills. Soler and Miller have described such approaches as representative of an ‘instrumental view’ (2003, p. 59) of the curriculum. The pervasiveness of the instrumental view should not be underestimated. The evaluation of the first-year pilot of the Foundation Phase (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2006) found that while there was widespread support for a greater emphasis on play and active learning, almost half of all practitioners questioned stated that the Foundation Phase document had no influence on their practice as it was perceived to be very similar to the previous curriculum framework. It may be, therefore, that the teachers in our study were interpreting the use of the outdoor environment (as promoted within the Foundation Phase) in the light of the current requirement to meet specified outcomes. In this respect, the encouragement for schools to develop ‘outdoor classrooms’ may not be helpful: as Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2006) indicate, this term (amongst others) would benefit from further ‘consideration, clarification and revision’ (p. 81). Further, while the evaluation report (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2006) notes that practitioners in the pilot schools reported an increased use of the outdoor environment, our research indicates that there may be a pressing need to look at *how* such environments are being used.

Conclusion

Outdoor play and learning is an important element of the new Foundation Phase for Wales. Our study found that the teachers’ ‘normal’ practice outdoors was no different from that implemented indoors and in both environments this did not reflect the kind of approaches indicated within the Foundation Phase framework. It was noted, however, that two schools did offer an alternative to outcomes-driven outdoor activity. The teachers in these schools appeared to recognise that the potential for something other than content learning existed outside—at least, within the natural outdoor environment. That the activities included in these ‘special’ sessions had specified outcomes indicates the embedded nature of accountability, but the relative ease with which the teachers allowed children to opt out of the planned tasks may also indicate that the teachers wanted children to get something else from the sessions.

The development of alternative outdoor sessions makes clear the duality of these teachers' current thinking about the outdoors at this time of transition: that it provides another context in which to pursue the 'normal' content-based learning and that it provides a 'special' space for children to develop a broader range of understandings, skills and attributes. It may be, as Aubrey (2004) notes in relation to teachers working within the English Foundation Stage, that this duality reflects the real tensions that are faced by early years teachers who currently work within a system dominated by a requirement to meet specified outcomes while also being expected to incorporate more informal, process-led approaches to learning. The development of 'special' activities in the natural outdoor environment may thus provide teachers with a way of bridging this transition while also representing a first step towards realising the potential of the outside environment and of thinking about children's learning in a more holistic and integrated way.

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