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The dynamics of early childhood spaces: opportunities for outdoor play?

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EDITORIAL

The dynamics of early childhood spaces: opportunities for outdoor play?

This special edition of the *European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Journal* has been a collaborative effort by the members of the EECERA Special Interest Group (SIG) *Outdoor Play and Learning*. The possibility of forming an Outdoor Play SIG was first discussed by Tim Waller (England) and Wendy Schiller (Australia) at the EECERA Annual Conference in Malta in 2004. In the following conferences in Dublin and Reykjavik the number of papers concerning outdoor play and learning increased considerably, reflecting a growing interest in establishing a SIG. At the Annual Conference in Prague in 2007 further discussions were held with Thomas Moser, Kari-Anne Jørgensen and Kari Emilson (Norway), culminating with an inaugural meeting of the SIG held in Stavanger in 2008 attended by 22 members from across the world. The group sought to:

- generate critical reflection on outdoor play and learning;
- encourage a clearer articulation and understanding of early childhood pedagogy, policy and practice in relation to outdoor play and learning;
- support and encourage cross-national perspectives on outdoor play and learning;
- support SIG members' research in a collaborative and cooperative manner; and
- share innovative and reflexive research on outdoor play and learning.

Tim Waller (England), Ellen Beate H. Sandseter (Norway), Eva Årlemalm-Hagsér (Sweden), Trisha Maynard (Wales) and Shirley Wyver (Australia) agreed to act as convenors for the SIG. In addition Ellen Beate H. Sandseter established a SIG website at: <http://sites.google.com/site/outdoorplaylearning/Home>.

Following the inaugural meeting the SIG organised three symposia at the 2009 conference in Strasbourg and as a result of the high quality papers presented by members at this conference and the high attendance at the symposia it was agreed to commission a special edition of the EECERA journal. The SIG continues to grow and now has 60 members from across the world and is organising five symposia at EECERA 2010 in Birmingham.

During the last century, there has been an overwhelming change in the nature of children's play in western countries. Even within a generation, a rapid decline in opportunities for outdoor play has been noted (Clements 2004; Francis and Lorenzo 2006; Ginsburg 2007). A combination of real and perceived pressures is changing the quality and quantity of children's play. One response is to romanticize the past and call for a return of the days when children could go out and play. While promotion of such views has had a role in raising awareness of changing opportunities for children, such memories are coupled with amnesia for harsh disciplinary practices, mantras of 'children should be seen and not heard' and a range of other practices that were not

respectful of basic human rights. The loss of outdoor play spaces for many children is one aspect of the intricate interplay of legislative, social, urban design, technological and pedagogical factors that introduce a complex set of opportunities and losses. Karsten (2005) argues that these factors have led to a 'new type of childhood' in which children spend less time than ever before outdoors and future generations of children may have increasingly lower expectations of the amount of contact with nature that they will have in their lives. Consequently, this is an important time for early childhood practitioners and researchers to re-evaluate approaches to outdoor play. Questions need to be asked such as: are the traditional notions of outdoor play that occur within the daycare or school play space still adequate or are there other opportunities that could be explored? Should the dominant image of the child be one of vulnerability or competence? And how does this fit with changing expectations of early childhood education and care (ECEC)?

As members of the Outdoor Play and Learning SIG, we are interested in promoting research that advances understanding of outdoor play in all environments, particularly those which are considered ECEC contexts. We do not consider it sufficient to merely accept that outdoor play is important in ECEC. The role of outdoor play should be challenged in order to advance understanding in this area. As Frumkin (2003) notes, although there is evidence that connection with natural spaces has demonstrable benefits for humans, the general debate about healthy places is often based on porous evidence or neglect of changes that have occurred in places deemed less healthy (e.g., improvements in indoor air quality have resulted from reductions in, or changes to, practices such as wood burning). Debates in ECEC can similarly run the risk of being based more on the message than the evidence if the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces within institutions, spaces beyond and changing childhoods are viewed as static rather than dynamic and left unanalysed. In classrooms, the introduction of digital technologies has been found to engage children in problem-solving, including children recognised as disruptive or having low attention to tasks in other contexts (see Laffey et al. 2003). Changed opportunities for children to pursue their interests and play in indoor settings should not be neglected when considering the relative benefits of outdoor play. Indeed it may be important to consider whether outdoor play is still as relevant to childhood as it has been in the past. Perhaps changes in indoor environments have shifted the balance and outdoor experiences have become less relevant. This special edition of the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* provides an important contribution to the evidence base on outdoor play. By bringing together researchers from a range of countries, using a range of methodologies in a wide range of outdoor settings, it becomes possible to examine the different affordances of various outdoor spaces (within centres/schools, public parks, wild areas), the relationship between institutional practices and children's play in outdoor spaces and the relationship to early childhood pedagogy.

Before discussing the above points in detail, it is important to briefly consider historically recent changes in the relationship between the state and the child, with a particular emphasis on children's rights. Romanticizing views of bygone childhoods requires neglect of the many important advances that have occurred, most notably those resulting from ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by 192 countries (UNCRC), exceeding any other human rights treaty (UNICEF 2006). Ratification of the Convention means that these countries are required to amend or develop laws and policies to implement the Convention. The Convention has 54 articles divided into three categories: provision, protection and participation. In the

following section, our main focus is on participation (acknowledging equal importance of provision and protection). Cashmore (2009) also notes that the last century has seen significant changes in the role of the state in children's welfare in common law countries. Responsibility of the state is a significant departure from previous views of the child as property of the father.

Children's right to participate is typically given consideration in western countries and is a core component of ECEC policy. Operationalizing participation, however, requires a commitment to providing appropriate contexts in which children can actively explore options necessary for active participation. As Bae (2009) demonstrates, from a Norwegian pedagogical framework, participation goes beyond mere 'individualistic choice routines' (391). Indeed, Bae argues that processes used by many institutions to demonstrate they are meeting state requirements may provide children with a false impression of participation in democratic processes. Turnšek and Pekkarinen (2009) found in their study of Slovene and Finnish teachers that implementation of democratic procedures in EC settings was correlated with teacher training but also related to ethno-theories of teachers. Further, these researchers found teachers' attitudes to generally be more liberal than the mandated positions of national curricula. Although the findings were generally positive with respect to participation, there were difficulties noted, particularly relating to children from minority groups and with respect to routines. As Pramling Samuelsson (2010) noted in a previous editorial of this journal, 'Accepting children as equal partners also means to make play visible, since play is supposed to be a great part of the child's world and the way into children's social life and learning' (121).

A major point of distinction between countries is collectivist or individualistic approaches to responsibilities for children. Durrant (2006, 7) contrasted the approach of Sweden to Canada and New Zealand. A significant feature of the Swedish approach is the 'collective responsibility for *all* citizens to care for and support children' (author's emphasis). This is in contrast to countries in which individual adult responsibility is emphasized, which has been implicated in exaggeration of risk and disrupted adult-child relationships (e.g., a hug by an adult being viewed as suspicious) (see Franklin and Cromby 2009). Durrant's concern is with protection from child abuse, but the issues raised regarding participation and collectivist versus individualistic principles of responsibility for children are equally applicable in ECEC. For example, Australian researchers have found teachers to be concerned about potential litigation should an accident occur during outdoor play. The response of these teachers is often to reduce the challenge of outdoor play even though they are aware that such restrictions result in a compromise for children (Bundy et al. 2009). This is a case where collective responsibility is lost, individual teachers feel the need to base pedagogical decisions on fear of individual blame. Still, there is probably a cultural influence on how caregivers and adults carry out supervision of children (Guldborg 2009; Little 2008). For instance, according to Guldborg (2009, 60), 'the Norwegians have a special love for outdoor pursuits and are reluctant to restrict children's freedom to roam outdoors – without adults watching them – to the same extent that other nations do'. Similarly, New, Mardell, and Robinson (2005) point out that Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and to some extent, Italian pre-school teachers have fewer concerns about children's risk-taking than do American pre-school teachers. Scandinavian countries, where the benefits of mastering risks, experiencing various weather conditions and exploring the national landscape are widely acknowledged and encouraged, have a more liberal approach to elements of risk in children's activities (New, Mardell, and Robinson 2005; Sandseter 2009a, b, 2010).

The OECD report on early education and care (2006) pointed to historical differences that have emerged between English speaking countries and Nordic/central European countries. Within the former, there is a 'schoolification' of ECEC, which has a focus on learning standards, particularly in the cognitive-linguistic academic domains. The latter have a holistic approach with emphasis on 'learning to live together and supporting children in their current developmental tasks and interests' (60). Both approaches have merits in terms of children's learning. However, the emphasis on a narrow range of abstract skills in the schoolification approaches make it easy to view play as dispensable in early learning. It allows for a very easy shift from outdoor play and learning environments to indoor structured approaches. This is the current reality in England and North America, where direct threats to play occurring during recess time with a push to increase time on traditional curriculum activities (Clark and Waller 2007; Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, and Singer 2006; McGillivray 2007; Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002).

Children's opportunities for outdoor play outside of contexts such as school and childcare have undergone significant erosion. It is well documented that changes in urban environments prevent children engaging freely in their neighbourhoods (Francis and Lorenzo 2006). Kernan (2010) discusses how changes in urban environments restrict children to 'islands' such as homes, daycare and schools. Children are, in this sense, absent from the community.

A further challenge is for teachers to consider the different opportunities available from outdoor play in daycare or school grounds and opportunities to engage in play in natural environments (see Waller 2007). Measures of quality, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, and Cryer 2005) do not all require experiences beyond the daycare grounds for a centre to achieve the highest rating for 'space'. Emerging research suggests that pre-school policies and practices regarding outdoor play are significant in determining children's levels of physical activity (Pate et al. 2004). Results are not always in agreement and rely on measures, such as accelerometry, which are still in the development phase for use in children's play (see Storli and Hagen, this volume). Nonetheless, recent reviews have started to reveal some consistent trends. For example, Reilly (2010) concluded that physical activity levels in childcare centres are typically very low whereas levels of sedentary behaviours are typically high. Dowda et al. (2004) found activity levels to be greater in centres which had higher staff qualifications and more field trips (four or more per month). Children in centres with lower ECERS-R scores spent more time in sedentary behaviour. Physical features of outdoor environments such as density (i.e., square metres per child) and presence of vegetation appear to have important influences on pre-school children's physical activity, although some inconsistent results on these factors have been reported (Trost, Ward, and Senso 2010). The presence of loose, unstructured materials has been found to increase physical activity levels (Bundy et al. 2009; Hannon and Brown 2008) and playfulness (Bundy et al. 2008) of children in the pre-school and early school years. Although physical space is important for outdoor play, the psychology of the space and opportunities for extended periods of time within the space cannot be overlooked (Moser and Martinsen, this volume).

In the introduction to their recent book on children's environments, Spencer and Blades (2006) make the point that children's competencies in dealing with the complexities of space and place are generally poorly understood by adults. Contributors to their book argue that even very young children have the ability to contribute to the planning and design of environments. Contributors to this volume of *EECERJ* share a similar

approach. Perceptions of affordances in outdoor spaces may vary considerably for children and adults. For example, the trips examined by Waters and Maynard (this volume) were to public environments that included hazards that children needed to learn to avoid. In their study, interactions between children and teachers were used to understand children's interests and perceptions of affordances in natural environments. Niklasson and Sandberg (this volume) demonstrate individual differences (age, gender) in perception of affordances, including perceptions of spaces as public or private. Little and Eager (this volume) found that public playgrounds did not match children's interests due to the reduced level of risk. Amongst their recommendations are designs for public playgrounds that make clear to children the level of risk involved. Each of these studies point to the importance of understanding children's perceptions and where necessary making certain features salient to children to promote understanding of their environments. Reduction of risk is through understanding of the environment rather than adult restriction. Such approaches require an assumption of the child as competent rather than one of the child as vulnerable and in need of adult protection (see Sandseter 2009a).

Early childhood pedagogy has an important role in providing opportunities for children to move outside the boundaries of regular roles. Theorising about gender relations in outdoor play, for example, is relatively recent (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, this volume). The final section in this volume provides compelling evidence that outdoor play is not inherently gender neutral. Waller's (this volume) findings from three groups given regular access to wild outdoor environments revealed that self-initiated outdoor play was not clearly gender specific, but for one group studied, gender specific behaviours emerged during routines (e.g., snack time) and pedagogy similar to that found within the institution.

An ongoing struggle in ECEC is the retention and development of pedagogy in the context of competing obligations to the state and other stakeholders. Maloney (2010) uses recent policy in Ireland to argue that the wide-ranging obligations in early childhood are unreasonable, especially as these are based on different images of the child and in a profession that has been recognized by the OECD (2006) as having poor working conditions, inadequacies in staff training and problems with pedagogical approaches. One of the difficulties may be that traditional institutional settings not attractive to a sufficiently diverse range of potential EC practitioners or may be a poor fit with pedagogical approaches. Articles within this special issue of EECERJ clearly demonstrate innovative pedagogical approaches that would not be possible in indoor contexts. Two articles (Emilson and Koch; Moser and Martinsen, this volume) demonstrate a preference for outdoor play by male EC practitioners. Emilson and Koch argue that the outdoor context is a better fit with the pedagogy of male practitioners.

Romantic reminiscences of the past, when children were free to play outdoors provide a further, problematic image of EC practitioners. Left unanalysed, such views allow for further dilution of arguments to increase staff qualifications when what is needed is a strengthening of pedagogical decision-making. An unanalysed view neglects the importance of pedagogical decision-making that is significant within institutional play contexts. Canning's study (this volume) of den-making in three contexts is particularly illustrative of this point. The delicate balance of following children's interests, providing new challenges to children but not exerting excess power is exemplified in the ongoing pedagogical decisions of practitioners and different evaluations of safety precautions dependent on context and practitioner approach.

Early in this introduction, we raised the possibility that the importance of outdoor play may have been superseded by changed opportunities indoors. The articles in this

volume provide evidence that outdoor play is not only essential in young children's lives, but there are sound reasons to extend what is understood by outdoor play. It is clear that outdoor play in traditional daycare and school playgrounds is important, but possibly serves a different role to play in forest schools (as discussed by Knight 2009; Maynard 2007a, b) or the excursions to outdoor areas involving varied terrain and natural features as found in the Outdoor Learning Project (OLP) (Waller; Waters and Maynard, this volume). Trips such as those that occur in the OLP may have an important role in making children visible in public spaces.

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