

B13. Sustainable development and outdoor play

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Over a period of time a number of studies and reports have noted the decline in both the quality of outdoor play opportunities for children and the frequency of access that children had to outdoor play (Children's Play Council *et al.* 2000; Cole-Hamilton and Gill 2002). These reports highlighted changes in society (increased traffic, parental fears, perceived dangers in the outdoors etc) as having significant impacts on children's access to play in the outdoor environment.

This case study explores the development of active learning opportunities for Playwork students to appreciate the relationship between children's play and access to outdoor play spaces in the context of sustainability and the sustainable development of communities.

Aims

The Playwork discipline at the University of Gloucestershire has developed an integrated package of measures to promote an appreciation of key themes, the aims of which are:

- For students to develop an appreciation of the significance of children's playful contact with natural spaces for health and well-being
- To develop a critical appreciation of the contemporary factors that may impact on children's opportunity to have unmediated contact with natural local spaces within their communities
- To recognise strategies and practical responses that may support the provision of appropriate compensatory spaces to redress the loss of natural space.

The initial activity has been through the development of *Playing Out*, a Level 3 module on the BA (Hons) Playwork programme at the University of Gloucestershire. The research from the development has also influenced a range of other initiatives. These include:

- 'Playing on the Wildside' (2005) – a practical publication outlining the philosophy of environmental playwork and best practice case studies, good practice guidelines, signposting and practical activities
- 'Wild and Away' conference – see Smith (2007 q.v.); and 'Play, Naturally' – a research review highlighting the significance of children's natural outdoor play published by the Children's Play Council in 2006.

Rationale

The need for a module on the Playwork degree programme that focused on outdoor play was identified in March 2003. At this time, Playwork Partnerships at the University had just been awarded £60,000 by the Better Play Lottery fund for their Wild About Play Project (Smith 2007), which had a remit to research and develop best practice in outdoor and environmental play opportunities across the southwest.

Sustainability focus

The main sustainability theme is the inclusion of children as active participants in their local communities, building a sense of belonging and attraction to, and protection of, valued play spaces. Research suggests that playing in natural spaces supports children's attachment to their local environments and in developing environmental awareness (Bixler *et al.* 2002; Wells and Evans 2003; Wells and Lekies 2006). Equally, children's use of their local spaces develops an appreciation of natural systems, a sense of connectedness, and fosters imagination and creativity. Children can be encouraged, through active participation in their local environments, to contribute to developing child-friendly environments (Hart 1997; Chatterjee 2005). Children are active agents and can articulate what they value in their local communities when appropriate methods are used to elicit their preferences (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003; Burke 2005).

The design of local communities that support children's diverse play needs is beneficial to all inhabitants, creating safe and vibrant streets and communities (Franklin and Connolly 2003). As such, the provision of appropriate play spaces within a local community is a central feature in bridging and building communities and supporting social cohesion.

Active learning

As with all modules in the Playwork Higher Education programme, *Playing Out* requires students to demonstrate how key learning is transferred into their work role, thus linking the theory with their practice. Within the *Playing Out* module, reflective practice is working on two levels.

First, by reflecting on their own experiences of playing out as children, students use memory as a reflective tool. Thus students are required to draw a 'map' of their own childhood play spaces at various ages of their childhood. From this initial map, as they progress through the module, students apply key models and concepts introduced as a theoretical framework for analysis. Thus students:

- Consider qualities of environmental memory (Chawla 1994) against specific sites on their childhood maps
- Identify ranging limits and extensions of range through childhood
- Write reflective, expressive accounts of a specific environmental memory – a spot of time (Chawla 2002) – and share this with other students
- Analyse environmental preferences and features of mystery, complexity, legibility, and coherence (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989)
- Explore the affordance of their childhood spaces and opportunities to actualise affordances (Kytta 2004)
- Consider qualities of 'special places' (Sobel 2002) and sites of restoration (Korpela *et al.* 2002)
- Apply models of place attachment to their personal maps (Derr 2002)
- Consider sites of risk taking and adventure.

Through this process, students gradually build up a complex analysis of their childhood play spaces. Accompanying this, students are encouraged to make connections with the contemporary landscape for children's access to outdoor play spaces, and to consider whether these are sustainable models for the future.

The second stage of reflection relates to their current practice in supporting children's opportunity to access natural play spaces. At this stage, students are required to apply models developed in their own childhood maps to current play environments – for example, by examining qualities of mystery

and complexity, exploring the actualisation of affordances, considering a play space as open or closed space (Sibley 1995). To support this, students are required to work with a group of children in a play setting to explore their feelings and experiences about their local play spaces.

Active learning is promoted through a range of teaching and learning methods, including a residential school. This is an initial face-to-face session to introduce key approaches and begin the childhood mapping process. The module workbook, week-by-week, develops key themes, introducing significant concepts, reflective tasks and activities, giving links to further reading and research papers, as well as prompts for discussions in the virtual learning environment, WebCT. In WebCT students share and review their findings and engage in debate around some of the themes developed through the module. Students are also encouraged to circulate and peer review their maps. Finally, teleconferences offer opportunities to engage in debate around a specific theme or topic.

The module has two points of assessment.

- Assessment 1 has a fairly traditional form that requires students to produce an essay critically analysing the significance of outdoor play to health and well-being and the implications for playwork practice.
- Assessment 2 the submission of a reflective portfolio – a collection of materials generated by the module exercises and evidence of analysis from the workplace. This 'patchwork text' style enables students to compile materials throughout the period of teaching and learning, and supply a brief reflective commentary for each piece. These writings are shared within the group as an important part of the teaching-learning process. The activities are designed to be varied, drawing on a range of different techniques and learning styles, and also personally and professionally meaningful, while at the same time supporting achievement of the module learning objectives.

Feedback

The responses from the first delivery of this module indicate that the second assignment task proved to be highly popular and effective. Students engaged at a personal level, and while this at times can be a

difficult and traumatic experience, this approach allowed students to become familiar with many of the key theoretical concepts and models introduced in the first half of the module. The opportunity to mentally (and for some, physically) return to their periods and places of childhood is an important feature for playwork practitioners (Hughes 2001).

The second stage, which sees a shift from a personal to professional perspective, produced some wonderful examples of synergy – one student found the exercises invaluable to informing the development of a local authority play strategy, while another used the materials and experiences to develop a training programme for playworkers. All students acknowledged that their approach to a consideration of the value of outdoor play and the planning of attractive spaces had been significantly enhanced from participation in this module.

One of the most important comments made by two of the students related to the need for a mid-semester residential or day event for students to meet up face-to-face and share their personal experiences.

Strengths and weaknesses

From the development of this module, and through the development of the 'Wild About Play' project at Playwork Partnerships, the work has influenced other initiatives related to the significance of children having access to natural spaces. The South West in particular has seen an increase in the number of organisations and local authorities employing play rangers specifically to support the further development of children's outdoor play opportunities

This in turn is likely to have significant implications for the development of future training programmes, hopefully to inform the development of play strategies and similar initiatives. Current new developments at Playwork Partnerships include a sector endorsed NVQ Level 3 course/qualification in outdoor play and a sector endorsed NVQ Level 2 course in play rangers.

Programmes

The Playwork programme (CertHE, DipHE and BA (Hons)) is offered as part-time, distance learning provision for current playwork practitioners working in a variety of face-to-face, development and managerial roles. Playwork focuses on supporting opportunities for play for school-aged children. The student cohort is largely mature with a higher proportion of

female students than male students, a reflection of the playwork sector as a whole.

Playing Out is a Level 3 module and can be taken by Playwork degree students, Playwork graduate diploma students and Associate Students who meet the entry requirements. The module carries a value of 15 CATS.

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