ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE THE PLACE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN OUTDOOR PLAY IN THE NURSERY SETTING

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My teaching career began in 1982 teaching the key stage 1 age range for seven years, followed by a move into nursery teaching both full time and later part time. Research began at Nottingham Trent University in 1997 accompanied by lecturing since 2000.

Getting Started
My research began through a desire to improve the outdoor play offered to the children in my nursery. I took an action research approach because this allowed the research to be collaborative, involving all of the practitioners in the setting. The main method of data collection has been through observation which has led to spirals of action and reflection looking at the children and their learning. I have studied how this links to the Foundation Stage curriculum and the way practitioners plan and teach in the outdoor setting.

The nursery garden
Most outdoor play in the Foundation Stage takes place in an outdoor play area. This is an area separate from the main school playground where many activities are set up with the opportunity for children to learn with the support of practitioners who can also assess and plan for future learning. Children can adapt and take charge of this learning environment which is of equal importance to the indoor setting. The hard landscape may include areas of grass and tarmac or a safety surface. Elements of the outdoor classroom and features of the setting will also be part of this session for example seating for story telling and garden areas for planting.

Bilton (2002) argues that an ideal structure for a setting would be:

- A settling in period at the start of the session when parents can talk to staff.
- Outdoor play then available but not announced.
- Children to have free play activity time with staff giving any necessary input.
- Then group work for children when appropriate followed by story or discussion time.
This seems a way round the "hit and run" approach often experienced when outdoor play is offered, children leave their activity and race for the door. By simply extending the outdoor play time from 45 minutes to 70 minutes is not necessarily going to prevent this from happening, it may just make it happen earlier. I wondered how environmental education fitted into this outdoor play setting. It was difficult to find some form of definition that would fit my interpretation of what early years environmental education might be. The term has different meanings to different people and more recently has included education for sustainable development as a strong theme. The history behind using the environment in the early years has a unique base which goes back to the early 1900's when Margaret and Rachel McMillan set up their first outdoor nursery in the London slums. Nursery education was developed in their nursery garden as an entity in its own right. It was never intended to be a watered down version of primary education, in fact at the time primary education was a harsh institution and many pioneers of early years education wanted to instigate change.

We are still wrestling with some of the same issues today: Is nursery education influenced by a bottom up or a top down approach? The Foundation Stage curriculum could be interpreted either way. It offers the opportunity to develop good practice that can be spread up into the other key stages but it can also be used as a vehicle to prepare children for the numeracy and literacy strategy as its prime function. Nationally it appears difficult to find a straight answer to this issue.

**Education for sustainable development**

A change in recent years has been the move from describing work as "environmental education" to being "education for sustainable development". In trying to define what I am doing I initially thought the new title was perhaps moving away from my focus. There seems to be a perception that by changing the title and emphasis to "sustainable" schools will be able to deliver the requirements of Agenda 21 on behalf of local authorities. Agenda 21 talks about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations asking us to think global and act local. At first I did not think this was so relevant to the nursery setting but on reflection it is most appropriate. In outdoor play children are acting at a very local level by using the nursery garden to explore relationships, investigate the environment, learn about the seasons, growing, adapting and changing...
the environment and learning about the impact of these changes on others. Children are gaining knowledge and developing attitudes and values that have to begin somewhere. The following case study exemplifies the rate of some of these changes.

Tom had a difficult start to nursery as his Mother had a baby on his second day. He also found it difficult to make himself understood because of poor speech. He needed a lot of praise for good behaviour as he tended to hit other children to get his point across. He spent a lot of time observing a group of older boys playing outside with the trucks. They stacked the trucks up with tools and took them down to the soft play area to sweep and collect leaves. As soon as this group moved on to school Tom took over the truck and claimed it as his own but it attracted the attention of another group of boys. As a result Tom had to pull these boys round in the truck. The effect of this truck play was that a friendship group began to develop and the same group of boys began to play together inside the nursery as well as outside.

The nursery setting is an ideal place to develop positive attitudes towards the environment at a very local first hand level to be expanded later into a more global concept. Looking back at the development of environmental education I thought at first there were clear differences between environmental education and education for sustainable development, but having looked at some of the early definitions for environmental education I am not convinced. What is clear is that when environmental education arrived as a term it was a new concept bringing together a number of existing, fragmented elements and adding a new awareness about the fragile state of the earth and mans' impact upon it. Clark (1969) states

"The goal of environmental education is to bring home to every citizen, so that he knows it deep in his heart and his bones, the simple facts that he is absolutely dependent on his environment, that he is affected by his environment, and that he affects his environment. These self evident truths are obviously neither self evident to nor considered truths by many people judging by their actions." (p.45)

Here we are, over three decades later and the Eden project in Cornwall is trying to do precisely this in showing people how we are totally dependent on plants for our survival and that it is our responsibility to see that plants have the appropriate environment to survive. I was beginning to feel that my quest to define environmental education was getting wider rather than more focussed and the "sustainable" element had a loose fit although at times its relevance to early years became clearer. It gets a bit lost in pages of literature about climate change and waste disposal and conservation of habitats, then all of a sudden a phrase brings it straight back to early years and this is one of those phrases. The review by Richard House in Environmental Education Summer 2002 of Sterling (2001) argues that sustainability is ahead of its time stating that "sustainability" as a paradigm must move beyond "environmental education".
"Planning and targets tend to be mechanistic, controlling, specific and time-bound; design and
aspiration tend to be organic, participative, open, interactive and evolving. From the current situation
of over planning, and too much top down control – which leads to rigidity and inability to respond to
change – we need to move towards the "sustainable design" of education." (NAEE 2002 p 28)

Of course outdoor play can provide this sustainable design of education. It already has a strong history
of being organic, participative, open, interactive and evolving. This goes some way towards
establishing my research not only as environmental education but also as sustainable development. So
much of the early years Foundation Stage Curriculum in the area of learning called "personal, social
and emotional development" is based on developing attitudes and values such as cultural tolerance,
sharing and taking turns, caring for the world around them, understanding what is right and what is
wrong and why. These goals are the foundations for the ability to take responsibility for actions later in
life.

**Knowledge and experience**

Are we focussed too much on knowledge and not enough on experience? Does it matter which comes
first? Does it matter what the ratio is of each? How can we find out? Do we go out with a knowledge
based objective to pass on to children but set this learning session in the outdoor environment using
the setting as the experience? Or do we let children gain the experience and then look to support it
with knowledge. The latter requires a higher level of perception and thinking on the part of the
practitioner, it is much easier to pull an objective out of the curriculum and say "This is what the
children will learn today." But is it the best way for young children to learn, do they retain the
information we give them, can they put it into a learning context that is relevant to them? When young
children are exposed to intensive teaching of phonics the short term gain is impressive but the long
term gain is not sustained. This type of teaching is certainly based on knowledge through experience
and not experience then knowledge.

This reflects upon the relationship between theory and practice, practice being the action. Is the
"knowledge" the theory and the "outdoor environment" the action? The action can be in the form of a
story, a task, a game, an activity but behind it there is always a learning objective which is the
knowledge we are trying to impart. The move towards making the nursery a watered down version of
the National Curriculum with the drive to feed children into the literacy and numeracy strategy is
knowledge led. To ease the conscience of those who have to enforce this strategy they can look to the
child initiated activities demanded by the curriculum and say,' well that's alright then ' because
children are still spending time on their own investigations. Of course there are no set amounts of time
for these things to happen, so it could be that children only have the first half hour of a session
undirected. This is a far cry from the roots of nursery education that was never intended to be a
watered down version of school. It evolved as a concept in it's own right to nurture and develop the
whole child in an holistic approach to learning.
Suppose you want to develop the touch sense! Lo! Here are a score of leaves, hairy sunflower, crinkled primrose, glossy fuchsia, and the rose. Do you want to compare colours, to note tints and shade? Well here is wealth a plenty. The herb garden will offer more scents than anyone can put in a box and a very little thought will make of every pathway a riot of opportunities. (McMillan 1925, p 57)

Adults do not always appear to act on the basis of their knowledge, take smoking as an example, so why should children be any different. If experience has a greater impact than knowledge perhaps children have been telling us this for a long time, it can be observed in the way children develop schemas as Piaget called them or repeated actions to gain knowledge. All the evidence we needed to show how children learn best has always been evident through observation, so why do we continue to push for knowledge wrapped up in artificially planned experience.

A group of boys were taking it in turns to say "ready steady go" and then race around the track. Oliver aged four was racing on a step bike, Jack aged 3 came up to Oliver to see if he could ride on the back. Oliver refused to allow him on. I questioned Oliver, thinking this was a social problem as Oliver was not prepared to share. Oliver responded that if he let Jack sit on the back he would not be able to win the race. Oliver had worked out that the extra weight would slow him down and give the other child an advantage.

The way we teach or present the curriculum to children depends on our teaching strategy or pedagogical model, often described as the art and science of teaching. Athey (1990, p 23) describes pedagogy as "how children and curricula are taught."

The pedagogy that interests me is the constructivist approach based on the principle that learning comes from direct action and personal experience of the child. Constructivists want to know how children construct their knowledge. My research is involved in looking at how children learn in relation to their environment so that I can improve the education we offer our children in the nursery. In the constructivist pedagogy the teacher considers what the child brings to the learning situation as well as what the teacher wishes to transmit. It seems a very balanced approach where the teacher and child are partners, each with something to offer. This approach is based on observation and evaluation. This would seem to be consistent with the Foundation Stage profile form of assessment.

"Because the teacher observes children closely and attempts to evaluate their valid contributions to the negotiation of meaning, the teacher is able to accumulate deep understanding of stage levels of cognition in children as well as other aspects of development." (Athey 1999, p 31)

My research always seems to offer more questions than answers. Outdoor play is in a position to offer high quality opportunities for environmental education and sustainability, the Foundation Stage curriculum provides a structure to support this. However if practitioners feel increasingly under pressure to move away from the aspirations of the McMillan sisters by limiting what is offered, such as

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles
activities that are only linked to specific focussed learning objectives, our children will lose an enormous range of learning opportunities at a vital time in their development. We may even find that children no longer want to rush for the door when it is time to play outside!

References


Websites

United Nations Division for Sustainable development

Local Agenda 21
http://www.la21.org.uk/

Further reading and links

Starting Early: Environmental Education during the Early Childhood Years. ERIC Digest.
An American view

Early years web links
Not wholly environmental in sustainability terms.

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles