VOICES FROM AN INNER CITY SCHOOL: A SNAPSHOT STUDY OF YOUNG CHILDREN’S LEARNING IN OUTDOOR CONTEXTS

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This is a fuller report of work tabulated in Owens (2002) and exemplifies the value of comparisons between locations. (Ed)

Introduction
This chapter focuses on recent research undertaken during a Summer Term in the Reception and Nursery setting of an inner city primary school in London Docklands. This research was used as a ‘snapshot’ study, to complement the main body of research that was being undertaken with three primary schools in Kent and reported elsewhere, (Owens 2000, 2003). This snapshot study differed from the main study in that observations, interviews and drawings were obtained over several days during the summer term only, whereas the other Kent schools were researched both during this term and earlier in the academic year.

The purpose of this snapshot study was to compare data from this inner city school with data from the Kent schools because of two identified key differences in the contextual learning environment. One was that of location: inner city, by definition, implying a physicality that embraced a concentrated population within a densely built up environment; and second, that the majority of pupils at this school had English as an additional language. The school had a mix of ethnicity, comprising first and second generation pupils of Chinese, Indian and Asian origin. The predominant first language at the school was Gujarati and for some pupils, the school was the only environment in which they had the opportunity to speak English.

In contrast, the Kent schools were either rurally located or set within small pockets of urbanisation among rural fringes. In addition, nearly all pupils at the Kent schools had English as a first language and, as the focus of the research methodology was to gather children’s significant named features and comments through reflective recall, there was a strong link with the medium of language. These two key differences were the rationale behind this decision to add data from a contrasting perspective.
Although the main research aim was to examine how children related to and valued aspects of their environment within the early school years, more particular research questions were framed for this phase of the research.

- How would data from this inner city school compare with that from the three Kent schools?
- How would children for whom English was an additional language (EAL) communicate ideas and thoughts about their environment?
- What surprises and themes would emerge?

Using these key questions, a more particular framework of aims was devised.

**Aims of the study**

- To reflect upon observations of children and staff within the context of the outdoor environment and access their thoughts and perspectives whilst in this environment;
- to access the significant memories of the children away from the outside environment and uncover learning and play events and/or settings that were imbued with value from the child's perspective.
- to access the perspectives of staff towards the general value of the outdoor environment and opportunities for learning and understanding therein;
- to analyse these perspectives in the broader narrative in which identities are shaped in relation to space/place.

The methodological approach taken was one of participant observer and a variety of approaches were used. These included:

- observing the interaction of children and practitioners throughout the day;
- asking children to talk and draw about the special things in their outdoor school environment whilst taping their responses;
- informally interviewing practitioners about the way outdoor learning was organised;
- examining planning documents;
- assessing the environmental provision of the school grounds.

Analysis of the findings entailed the exploration of findings in the light of policy, practice and research and an examination of surprises and themes.

**Practitioners’ perspectives**

The Nursery unit in the school catered for pupils aged from three to four years who were taught the Foundation Stage Curriculum while the adjoining Reception class area catered for children aged four and five who were taught the National Curriculum. This was the first major difference noted between this and the other research schools as all of the Kent Schools followed the Foundation Curriculum up to the end of the Reception Year. There were fifty two pupils in the Nursery and a Reception class of twenty-eight.
The Reception class and Nursery unit occupied two defined areas within one long room space. Within the nursery area, several different spaces were partially separated out to accommodate different activity areas as well as individual class meeting places. In such an integrated setting, it was obvious that practitioners would need to plan and work together very closely and this was borne out by interviews. Staff acknowledged that planning was the biggest burden but was necessary to keep track of what was happening to each of the differentiated groups throughout the day. Many of the staff informed me that planning was intensive:

"There's a lot of planning, seven A3 sheets per week.".

Weekly planning sheets were evident on the walls of both the nursery and reception. As well as a weekly plan for National Curriculum targets for reception children and Early Learning Goals for Nursery children, there were also planning sheets in these areas just pertaining to the outside area. A teacher from the nursery explained that while they shared the same topics, nursery and reception staff planned separately for everything except the outside planning sheet, which was done together. The theme for the term was 'growth' and this week there was a mini-topic of trees.

The outside area planning sheet for that week contained for example, opportunities for water play activities, sorting tree shapes (on the outside paper cutting table), tree decoration and visits to a nearby park to look at the trees. The Foundation co-ordinator explained that all the nursery children had gone in small groups to the park that week, and would go again the following week for more 'hands on experience'. The Foundation Stage practitioners appeared to value outdoor visits, as one remarked:

"We try and take them... as often as we can... it's a valuable experience"

Another nursery teacher explained that the planning was daunting but necessary to ensure the smooth management of learning in the nursery unit. She explained that both teachers and support assistants met after school once a week to plan in depth for the following week. It was apparent that a well planned and consistent daily routine was a prerequisite for effective learning and assessment. One of the teachers stressed to me how important their initial routines were.

"They have to get into the routine of learning, that you know, like when in the morning they come in and first thing they have..... (described the series of activities)".

In the nursery, there was evidence throughout the day of the meticulous organisation of activities and differentiation. Teachers and nursery teachers worked together with children seamlessly both in the indoor and outdoor settings.
The outdoor area in particular was highly valued by practitioners and the upkeep and planning reflected this. Practitioners said that they encouraged the children to make full use of the many resources and during outdoor time staff were observed encouraging children to play with the many resources. All 52 children in the nursery and reception classes were able to access the area designed specifically for them, from doors that led directly out from their classes. The outside area extended the length of the foundation unit, with a curved boundary separating it from the outside area used by the older children. Whilst the outer boundaries comprised beds of varied shrubbery and small trees, the inner area was composed of a several types of brick paving, producing interesting patterned effects. Set within this was the occasional tree, and two permanent structures - a brick sandpit with a canopy roof and a wooden climbing frame. Adjoining this area was the 'Big playground', a more empty space used by older children in Key Stage One and to which area the younger children enjoyed occasional access.

Also in the Foundation Stage play area, were several temporary play structures, which included tyres and planks, tunnels, modular climbing frames, plastic containers for water and dirt play and hoops. Along the edge of the outside classroom wall were some tables and chairs with materials for cutting. Games with numbers were painted directly onto a tarmac portion of the ground. The overall impression was one of stimulation and choice.

The reception class had access to this area at playtimes, with occasional use for teacher directed activities. The nursery however, worked in a system of group rotation whereby the outside area was in almost constant use by at least one group of children throughout the day. At the beginning of the school day, after registration, the first group of nursery children was to be seen in both free and teacher directed play in the outside area. While this was happening, the reception children were sitting quietly listening to classical music and practising handwriting. What was surprising about this early observation was that although the nursery children could be clearly seen and heard through the windows of the reception class, none of the reception children were paying them any attention but were concentrating on the task in hand. This suggested that not only was it a familiar happening, but that the children were not distracted by the play on, for example, the climbing frame, because they were used to being able to play on it themselves.

One nursery nurse explained that she was going to do some gardening with the children.

"We give them an opportunity to plant in the garden... they have to do the work themselves... we show them how to use the tools and what they're called..."

Observation of this gardening activity revealed the careful thought that had gone into planning and resourcing. The nursery nurse explained that all the children would have an opportunity to participate as it was one of several rotated activities. The children were directed to a flowerbed, given the appropriate tools and told what to do.
Another nurse was observed playing 'Hoola Hoops' with the children. She explained that you had to be very active because the job was very demanding but that she enjoyed it. As the conversation deepened, she confided that:

"sometimes you feel tired…. you know….it's a long day. I haven't been well recently… I can't let people down... let the children down."

This was typical of the overall sense of commitment and responsibility that came through from talking with various practitioners. All of them were responsive by their comments to the individual needs and nuances of the children.

**Children’s responses**

Children's perceptions of the outside play area.
Research has consistently shown that children who are proficient in their first language are more likely to reach a similar standard in additional languages such as English (DES, 1989). It has also been recognised that language development in English and the child's home language can be mutually reinforcing (DES 2003).

The majority of the children in the Foundation setting communicated willingly in English to English speaking adults, albeit in very simple phrases. Many of children with EAL showed an ability to switch languages according to the perceived audience. For example, in the play areas outside some children were speaking in Gujarat, but when I approached them they switched into English for my benefit. Simple introductions enabled me to realise that I would be able to communicate with the children well enough to explain my intentions and most of the children that I approached were willing to engage with the research activities. A few children were unwilling to take part and very shy so they were thanked for listening and not coerced in any way.

Conversations with reception children
During conversation with some of the reception children, it became apparent that the children occasionally were allowed to go on the 'big playground'.

When they were asked which they preferred they both indicated the 'big playground'.

**Boy 1:** Big playground is better...
**Researcher:** Why?
**Boy 1:** It's very big!
**Boy 2:** Yeah, and little playground is too small!
**Researcher:** Too small for what?
**Girl 1:** For a game... .for a place... . (the children used their hands expressively and shook their heads, as though they were unable to find the words they needed.)
Although the children did not have a large playing field, indeed in the foundation play area there was no grass to be seen at all, there appeared to be ample room in their play area. However, the children's perception was that it was not as good as the older children's area. The older children's area had patches of green that appeared to be of a synthetic fabric similar to 'astro- turf' and was not filled with as many 'play objects' on the ground as the foundation unit's area, possibly suggesting more open space.

Indeed, the children then elaborated the perception of objects such as the many toys and equipment cluttering up the space on as they sought to explain further.

Boy 1: For the... you know the nursery class? They mess in it!
Researcher: How?
Boy 1: If the nursery play... they mess all of it!
Researcher: How do they do that?
Boy 1: They mess all the cars! Then they say... tidy up! Then Line up! Then they mess all of that!
Researcher: So, who picks up the cars when it gets messy?
Boy 2: Teachers.

Observation of the morning playtime when the reception and nursery children overlapped playtimes revealed more information about the children's description of 'messiness'. The area was littered with a variety of equipment and lots of cut paper, (the table with paper to cut and draw was very popular but produced a lot of mess). Before the children lined up, they were urged to pick up the mess by the staff, although in effect it was the staff who did the majority of the work. It was however, soon quickly cleared – ready for the next batch of children to repeat the process.

The three children quoted above were also drawing pictures of 'special places' in their school as they talked. They had been encouraged with many different verbal prompts to draw anything they liked to do in their outdoor area, a special place they liked to go to or anything outside that they thought was important. Although the children had begun drawing eagerly, it was some time before the gist of their conversation was apparent.

Boy 1: I've done Coroman!
(pointing proudly to his drawing and inviting me to label it)
Researcher: How do you spell that!
Boy 1: C-o-r-o-m-a-n ... Coroman! (delighted and confident)
Researcher: Is this your friend?
Boy 1: No! It's Coroman... it's cartoon!
Researcher: Ah... ... and you're playing a game... with your friends?
Boy 1: Yes. I... am... playing... a ... game... with... my... friends. (says this very slowly and carefully so that I can write it on his drawing).
The other boy in the group was also drawing cartoon characters (from the same series I later discovered). The two boys then remembered their pretend play and begin to get quite excited. They reeled off a list of cartoon character names and tried to explain what was happening in their drawings.

Boy 2: It's a mouth fire!
Researcher: A mouth fire?
Boy 2: Yeah... ooooooh (sound effects)
Researcher: Is this a game you play?
Boy 1: Yes, a very dangerous game!
Researcher: A dangerous game? Why is it a dangerous game?
Boy 1: Because you get scared of that.
Boy 2: Very, very scared of that! Of Tentaman going to give a spark, and then Agaman going to bring fire... er... and Bearman going to give wind and... and Babuman going to give fire and Gagaman going to have a... a... (Both boys look for a response)
Researcher: I don't really know that cartoon... do you watch it at home?
Boy 2: I watch Coroman!
Girl 1: I watch that!
Boy 1: I watch that!

The boys explained that they played this game on the playground. (They were later observed playing imaginary chase and fight games during playtime). Although the girl admitted that she watched the programme at home, her drawing contained none of the characters. She drew herself playing with her friends initially, then added a drawing of a fish and a bird and said that it was the 'fish bird game'. Later in the conversation, the girl added importantly:

"This is the Rainbow Fish." (Pointing to the fish she had drawn).

The girl had been observed in 'free reading' time earlier on choosing and reading the Rainbow Fish book. One of the boys looked closely at her work and drew a fish himself and something else.

Boy 2: This is a rainbow fish... and this is an, an (he is thinking hard of the right word)
Girl 1: An octopus?
Boy 2: Yes! And this is the Foxkid character... oh, it's Coroman in the water, Coroman fell in the water, and Coroman eat the fish and Coroman eat the octopus!

The two boys finished their drawings and had a shared main theme of cartoon inspired play. The girl also had a theme of play, inspired so it seems, by characters from a book. One of the boys also used the idea of a fish to add to his collection of play images. This communal elaboration of remembered
images was a continual thread through the research that linked all children's anecdotal evidence no matter what their age, gender, background or contextual setting. For example, it was common for members of a researched group of children to draw things that others had drawn, usually claiming that it had jogged their memories.

When the children were asked specifically what was in the outside area, they were either unwilling to suggest many ideas or lacked the vocabulary to do so. The only thing that they came up with was 'climbing frame' which was said by one of the boys. Any attempts to steer the conversation into further exploration of this sort reverted back to talk of the imaginary games that the children were drawing.

Researcher:  What's in your playground
Boy 1:  (Shrugs)
Boy 2:  Don't know.

Researcher:  What things have you got in your playground?
Boy 2:  Er...climbing frame.
Researcher:  Yes?
Boy 2:  Tentaman! It's Tentaman! (He indicates his drawing).
Boy 1:  No, Coroman.
Researcher:  Can you think of anything else that you like about the outside of your school... things you like to do?... things you like to see?
Boy 2:  Climbing frame.
Researcher:  Oh, can you tell me about that then please?
Boy 2:  This is Tentaman!
(points to picture).

Bearing in mind the large and varied equipment, the colourful flowers and numerous trees and shrubs, it was notable that none of this was deemed worthy of mention by these reception children. Later, another boy joined the group and wanted to take part as one of the boys and the girl left. In an effort to find out more the children were asked if they had to look after anything in the playground.

Boy 3:  Everything outdoors! Climbing frame.
Researcher:  Do you like that?
Boy 3:  You can swing down on it.

At this point the conversation was again hi - jacked by 'Boy 2' drawing a crab. The conversation switched to animals.

Researcher:  Are there any animals in your school?
Boy 3: Yes, and they live in the zoo. (He paused thoughtfully and then spoke excitedly). And caterpillars! We saw them before!
Researcher: Tell me about the caterpillars…
Boy 3: Do you know what? I went to the jungle – I saw bears in the jungle.
Researcher: Where was the jungle?
Boy 3: Where was it? Do you know where birds live high up in the sky? And me and my sister jumped really higher and up there in the clouds…. there is a jungle!
Researcher: Was this in real life? Or was it a dream? Or make believe… a story?
Boy 3: I'm just pretending.

On a previous visit by a colleague, an incident had been noted in which caterpillars had been spotted in the playground bushes causing lots of excitement amongst the children. The staff had cordoned the area off fearing that they might be poisonous and warned the children not to touch them. One boy who had remembered this incident spoke at some length, outlining his fear as well as his inability to explain what had happened to the caterpillars, though he had remembered what he had seen vividly.

Boy 3: They climbed the wood, they climbed the wood like that yeah, (he wiggled his fingers to demonstrate), and went behind the wood……..They've got a special bite!

He later elaborated some of his knowledge about the dangers of caterpillars:

Boy 3: And if the caterpillars give spots… all the children will die!

When he was asked what was to be written about the caterpillar he had drawn, he doggedly repeated:

They give you spots.

From the conversation, it appeared that the children were unaware of the caterpillar life cycle.

Researcher: Do you know that caterpillars change into butterflies?

All the children looked at each other in disbelief.

Boy 3: No! I…. I think so… How do you know?
Researcher: I've seen them…
Boy 3: (Laughing) I've seen a fish turn into a bike!

This incredulity with the nature around them coupled with curiosity appeared to lead the children into fantasy where inappropriate and burgeoning vocabulary was used in an effort to make sense of
situations. The reference to jungles in the sky, and bears that lived there may well have been prompted perhaps by a visit to a zoo (the researcher was unable to ascertain the facts behind these remarks) or may have been prompted by other images. As Palmer (1994) remarked, young children tend to accept the world as it is given through observation and often confuse separate realities. The caterpillars had been a real incident that had obviously fascinated the children, but left at least one of them with the impression that all caterpillars were dangerous creatures that could kill children!

Later in the playground, more evidence was found pertaining to the fascination with tiny creatures when a wood louse was found. A boy began running around in excitement with it in his hand amidst a chorus of shrieks. The woodlouse was in danger of being poked and squashed and an untimely end seemed inevitable. The suggestion was put to the children that perhaps it should be put back where it had been found, which provoked a defensive reaction from the child holding it.

Child: It's not scared!
Researcher: I think it might be... when they're scared they go into a little ball... like that.
Child I pushed it into a little ball.
Researcher: You might hurt it... it's very tiny! Is it still alive?
Child Yeah... (begins to examine it more closely) What's it called?
Researcher: Woodlouse.
Child: Woodlouse. W o o d l o u s e. (The child played with the word in his mouth and stared at the tiny creature)

The child then moved to the bushes and looked wordlessly for support. It seemed an appropriate moment to stoop and indicate a suitable place for the woodlouse to be placed and the child gently deposited the lucky creature without further verbal communication.

During this exchange, the focus on the fragility of the creature invoked curiosity. Once its name was known, the children seemed to regard it more respectfully and carefully replaced it. The value of perceptual differentiation through the power of naming is cited by Ward (1998), as a fundamental aspect of learning in the early years, particularly with regard to the environment.

Conversations with nursery children
One of the nursery children came alone to draw a picture and talk. The first thing that she drew was an enormous flower.

Girl 2: It's a flower.
Researcher: What kind of a flower is it?
Girl 2: A sunflower.
The girl explained that her teacher had helped her to grow sunflowers. She said that they had lots of flowers outside. She was also able to explain what she liked about the outside. It was the sandpit.

Girl 3: It's the sandpit... near the wall.
Researcher: What do you do there?
Girl 3: We build... a castle.

After this interview some of the nursery children showed some runner beans in pots that they were growing outside.

Researcher: Who grew them?
Boy 4: We did
Researcher: Did you! What did you have to do?
Boy 4: Just grow them.
Researcher: What do you have to do to make them bigger?
Boy 4: Water them.

The nursery children talked more about events and objects rooted in reality than the reception children had done. The events they talked about reflected recent learning experiences. They seemed particularly proud of their efforts at growing and spoke with enthusiasm.

Another recent learning experience had been a visit to the park and nursery children were observed during an assessment activity with one of the teachers. The children were asked to draw some trees, cut them out and then stick them onto a simple map. The map was large, simple in design and showed the school and immediate area, i.e. the adjoining road and the park. The children were asked to place their trees where they remembered seeing them, with prompts from the teacher i.e.

Teacher: Where did we see lots of trees?
Boy 4: At the park
Teacher: That's right, at the park. Can you find the park on the map?

The boy, who was three years old, was rapt and totally engaged in this activity. He remembered accurately and quickly learnt how to read the map to place his trees. The girl however, either did not want to do this or was unable to. Despite patient and helpful prompting from the teacher, she did not know where to put her trees, finally deciding to put them in the middle of the black paper that signified the road. When the teacher queried that they had seen trees in the road, she just shrugged. While the one child's apparent inability to complete this task did not necessarily prove a lack of understanding, the other child's ability to do so reinforced findings that children as young as three are capable of simple mapping tasks, (Matthews 1992). Spencer, Blades and Morsley (1989), stressed that children as young as three are potentially able to make geographical observations and constructions and recommended that graphicy be taught as the norm, to younger children. Their research showed...
that a group of nursery children who received teaching about room layouts via doll's house discussions fared better than a group who received no teacher input. The way that the children subsequently organised the furniture in the doll's house, showed that they had learnt more than merely what furniture was appropriate for which room. The children were able to place the furniture in a more appropriate spatial layout, and for this reason Spencer et al (1989) claimed that the children's learning had been accelerated through teacher intervention in this respect. These research examples serve as reminders that children's environmental competence is often underestimated and that much valuable cognitive development takes place in the very early years that should be attended to.

**Issues and challenges**

**The provision**

In terms of the physical provision of the school grounds, the environment was both aesthetically pleasing and challenging, making the most of the relatively small, (when compared to schools in the Kent study,) space. The planning provision for the outdoor areas was comprehensive and allowed for both child and practitioner initiated play. However, observations of planning and practice revealed that the reception children had fewer opportunities for outdoor activities than the nursery children did. Was this a result of the contrasting opportunities afforded by the Foundation curriculum and the National Curriculum? While the Foundation Curriculum requires that daily learning activities should incorporate outdoor play, the National Curriculum makes no such specification.

**Planning and ownership**

The need for careful planning and collaboration in the use of the outdoor area appeared to be an influential factor in raising its perceived value among practitioners. This was reflected in their desire to keep it stimulating and tidy and their willingness to involve children in outdoor activities. A message of value was thus conveyed to children, who also conveyed a desire to keep it tidy.

To what extent children felt that they had ownership of the grounds was in doubt. There was evidence of what Hart (1997) has termed token participation, in that children were allowed to plant things and decorate the exterior by arranging artwork but there was no evidence of children partaking in the planning process or effecting change. One reason for this may have been that, as a relatively new school, the grounds were designed to be fully functional from the start and as such not requiring modification, only upkeep. However, although the grounds were designed for the children, they were not by the children and this highlighted some interesting questions. Did this situation serve to detach the children from a feeling of ownership and thus invalidate any feelings of involvement and responsibility? And if so, could this be why these young children, generally, had limited vocabulary pertaining to this, their immediate environment?

**Outside activities and vocabulary**

Observation of mapping activities arising from fieldwork confirmed research findings that very young children are capable of understanding and interacting with simple maps. It was evident that
practitioners realised the importance of field trips, especially in this urban context, ones that gave opportunities for children to engage with natural surroundings, i.e. the park. However, examination of the children's vocabulary revealed worrying shortcomings about their awareness of natural features. This phenomenon was evident to some extent from nursery and more interestingly, to a greater extent from reception children.

One could argue that such functional vocabulary may be harder for children for whom English is a second language, to acquire, especially as it relates to aspects of the environment that are only encountered in the school setting. However, there were two contradictory pieces of evidence that counter this hypothesis. One was that nursery children appeared to have a greater knowledge of such functional vocabulary, (especially that relating to natural features) and the other was that some reception children displayed a grasp of complex cartoon names and story plots that they had learnt through media encounters.

The demands of the Curriculum at different Key Stages may offer a further explanation. Bowles (1998) warned that while children gain valuable learning experiences from field trips and outdoor experiences, much of the learning may be lost if not repeated regularly. Is it possible that reception children have a lesser functional vocabulary than nursery children because they have forgotten experiences that were accessible to them only within the Foundation curriculum? This is a bold assumption with strong repercussions and deserves fuller investigation. This suggestion echoes findings in the Pilot Study where reception children were found to have a greater and more specialised language relating to the natural environment than older children in the same school. (Owens 2001). The reception children in question had very recently enjoyed rich outdoor learning experiences whereas the older children had not.

Another side to this issue concerns the evidence that children were actively engaged in communication with others and in making meaning through the use of language that drew heavily on specialised vocabulary gleaned from television and computer games. Why has this learning taken place so effortlessly whereas learning the language of the here and now reality of the child's immediate locality appears so limited? Indeed, it is a truism that many young children seem to acquire the names of television characters, McDonald's menu lists and popular brand names without effort while struggling to name three birds or flowers.

This is a major issue and relates to previous discussions about mediated and direct experiences. One explanation again suggests a connection to curricular practice, as it was predominantly the reception children who exhibited such mediated awareness. It may be that the slightly older children were permitted more access to mediated images in the home environment than the younger children. Hypothetically, it could be that if access to outdoor environments becomes restricted that the child's natural disposition to explore finds an outlet in virtual reality. It also raises the question, if vocabulary arising from mediated images can be so easily retained by the knowledge hungry brain of young
children, what other conceptions and misconceptions about the world are being absorbed? Furthermore, how can children be expected to distinguish real from imaginary worlds if they lack the vocabulary to engage fully with both?

Contrasts between city and country
There were two clear differences that became apparent between children's responses in this setting and those from the Kent schools. One was the influence of mediated images in the construction of children's environmental awareness and the other the structure of the school grounds provision. In the first case, for example, whereas some children at the inner city school had discussed their knowledge of and fascination with television characters none of the children at the Kent schools had given references to images gleaned from television or video sources. In the second case, the inner city school differed from the Kent schools in that the physical size of their outdoor area was much smaller, had no real grass areas or any mature trees although the entire area was immaculately landscaped. This was a custom built ready to use landscape and the children appeared to have no ownership of it, save for being allowed to plant some flowers. They did have an impressive array of outdoor equipment, which certainly encouraged gross motor skills, although some children had stated that they preferred to run in the open space of the larger playground.

In contrast, the school grounds of the three Kent schools were large with grassed areas, 'wild' areas and mature trees. All of them bore signs of child-orientated involvement in landscape practice. For example: at Edge school, children had been involved in the building of a gazebo; in Town school, children had been involved in the making of a vegetable garden while at Village School, regular Action Days were held where children and parents worked on outdoor projects decided through a school council. None of the Kent schools had outdoor play equipment to match the provision at the inner city school. In fact, during the Summer months, most children at the Kent schools chose to spend the majority of their play times in the expanse of the open space of the school field, playing ball games or imaginary games like hide and seek.

Implications for practice
Practitioner role
The role of the practitioner is without doubt a complex and demanding one in Early Years education. In this inner city school, the practitioners placed a great deal of attention on planning in order to provide continuity and stimulating challenges and the effect of this overall was that of a vibrant community of learners. However, the research visit highlighted some issues which, staff appeared to be unaware of. One of these was the lack of engagement with the outdoor area as evidenced by children's poor functional vocabulary and absence of active environmental involvement. Another was the perceived imbalance between children's real and mediated experiences. Both of these issues were perceived as being interrelated.

School ground design

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles
The physicality and design of any school grounds is inherently important. This environment should ideally motivate and sustain learning, for example: by stimulating and engaging children's curiosity; by promoting active exploration and by encouraging concern and care. Ideally, school grounds should provide a range of habitats and landscapes as well as offering ample opportunities for children to explore, play and be actively involved in their upkeep. One aspect of the environment noted in this researched school was the absence of outdoor signs and labels. All practitioners realise the value of indoor signs as an aid to learning and yet often, little use is made of the outdoors. In meeting the challenge of educating EAL children, signs could be written not only in English but also in languages that children would recognise. This would convey a sense of value of both child and environment. Signs could incorporate labels for features, directions to places within the grounds and information panels. Children could also be involved in deciding what is labelled, and by giving names to areas that reflect their personal engagement. Young children are known to enjoy personalising private play areas by giving them names, Matthews (1992).

Environmental issues
It is important for practitioners to raise awareness of environmental issues without causing alarm but rather, promoting what can be done.

There are rich opportunities to be mined in the school grounds for the practice of active citizenship, for developing positive and active connotation of place and enabling children and local communities to realise that they have a degree of control over their immediate environment. For example, it is a value raising exercise to seek parental help on planned action days within the school grounds in which parents are invited to work together with the school community to enhance the surroundings. This kind of participation can be more easily structured through collaboration with outside agencies, for example Groundwork or the Eco-school project run by Encams. These kinds of activities also help to embed new language in meaningful and memorable contexts while research has shown that shared aims and goals between pupils and practitioners in early years settings can accelerate learning, (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002).

While the acquisition of functional vocabulary is a crucial starting point in any dialogue of environmental care, cultural environmental understanding is necessary to enable participants to effect change. Practitioners can facilitate the practice and deployment of relevant skills by encouraging children to share their views with each other and by openly valuing different perspectives. The emergent understanding of shared meanings paves the way for resolving more complex issues.

The issue arising from the constraints of the National Curriculum, in that it appears to offer fewer opportunities for outdoor engagement than the Foundation Curriculum, is one that practitioners are less powerful to resolve. Until the contribution of environmental issues in preparing children for their place in the real world is recognised and exercised in a coherent and accessible curriculum framework
across all Key Stages, the balance of power remains with a curriculum that can be quantified and prescribed.

**Summary**

In summary, what emerged from this snapshot study of an inner city school reflected not only the multiple perspectives evident within such a rich cultural community, but the way in which perspectives were anchored to aspects of real and imaginary space in such a way that physical and temporal boundaries often blurred. Such construction and representation of mediated rather than 'real' space is, arguably, more manifest in and indeed partly attributable to the condition of the urban environment for several interlocking reasons. Physical space is at a premium, access to what space exists is limited due to physical and/or cultural boundaries, while mediated images and experiences have a common coinage rooted in commercialism and as such, sadly, are more accessible.

This phase of the research highlighted the role of the practitioner within the current educational context in creating a balance of real and mediated environmental experiences in the early school years. That is to say that there is a need for the outdoor environment to be used in such a way that meaningful memories are jointly constructed and children given the opportunities and motivation to learn how to adequately communicate a sense of place and a sense of action. Such a balance is argued to lay a firm foundation for critical environmental education, a vital component of sustainability. Although this is a challenge for all educators, it is perhaps especially so for those (the majority) who teach in the multi-cultural, fragmented and contradictory landscapes of urbanisation.

**References**


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