

PLAYLINK

Oh, I thought we agreed, it's got to be good for you: Nature, Health, Learning, Play and Social Development

A PLAYLINK Discussion Paper prompted by Scottish National Heritage's recent conference 'Sharing Good Practice, School Grounds for Nature, Health, Learning, Play and Social Development' at which Judi Legg, PLAYLINK Associate, showcased her work at Riverside Primary School, Stirling.



We believe that learning and play environments should be beautiful, individually designed, should please and stimulate the senses, and be sources of delight and surprise. Nothing less will do.

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One of PLAYLINK activities is work with schools. We work with schools to change for the better the school outdoors. Put another way, we work with schools so that children can release for themselves the possibilities that the outdoors can prompt, allow and encourage.



We do this for all the reasons today's conference is about.

Precisely because we support the broad aspirations of the conference, this brief paper spends a moment taking a look at some of the inhibitors to securing our goals.

Oh, I thought we agreed; or, partnerships and the perils of superficial agreement

In practice the terms 'nature', 'health', 'learning', 'play', 'social development' have different meanings, or at least there are differences of emphasis, depending in part on the organisation its values and objectives.

Thus 'play' may mean one thing to a teacher in the context of formal education, and another to an advocate of 'free play'. In practical terms, this means schools need to think about what they mean by 'play' in the context of lesson-time; and 'play' in the context of breaktime. Some thinking on this can be found at:

<http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/schools/index.html>



Similarly, what constitutes 'health' is a contested or at least ambiguous category. Is it 'healthy' to fall over, to get cuts and grazes, perhaps even to secure a broken arm or leg? If the answer is simply an unqualified 'no', it may be that misunderstandings weaken the connection between stated commitment and actual practice.



'Nature' is of course a terribly good thing. But children's engagement with it may be constrained by institutional and individual anxieties about everything from children getting dirty, to fears of contamination and disease. Some concerns will be legitimate and necessary, but in other cases anxiety might be more in the order of 'secondary order anxiety' – not 'anxiety' about the thing itself, but concern about how others, parents, regulators,

the health and safety adviser, will respond to children's potentially messy, unpredictable, sometimes risky engagement with 'nature'.



There is always the danger that in the eagerness to embrace the language of partnership, significant differences of objectives, values and consequential practice within and between institutions become masked. Collaborative endeavour – and the potential for meaningful partnership – requires as a pre-requisite clarity about the meaning and responses to our common terms.

Risk, anxiety, protecting the institution, not the child

Risk-taking is a condition of life. It is unavoidable. It is also, on many occasions, a highly enjoyable thing to place oneself 'at risk'. This is one of reasons people choose to go skiing and surfing; and children generally like to climb trees, or swing higher than those of an anxious disposition think they should.

Risk-taking is also highly functional: it is the vehicle for learning through experience what cannot be learnt by any other means. Thus the qualities of self-confidence, motivation, resilience are in part developed through the exercise of children's autonomous choice-making about what they want, and think themselves able, to do.

Thus, learning institutions that are committed as absolutes to 'risk reduction' or 'risk elimination' are perhaps undermining their broader educative purpose and, paradoxically perhaps, countering efforts to ensure children's healthy – social, emotional and physical – development.



There is in fact no reason in law that children should not have access to beneficial risk-taking opportunities. And now that 'risk-benefit assessment' has been endorsed by the HSE, and Lord Young's recent report to Government 'Common Sense, Common Safety', there is still less reason for schools and local authorities to constrain unnecessarily children's life-enhancing, risk-taking outdoor activities.

The question to be addressed is: in any particular case, what is an acceptable level of risk in relation to the benefits that might flow from the activity being assessed?

For more on risk-benefit go to:

http://www.playlink.org/services/risk_and_play/risk_assessment_workshop.html

Maintenance

Good maintenance is a vital component of any sustainable attempt to enhance the school outdoors. The former head of Stirling Play Services, now a PLAYLINK Associate, has rightly said that we should be speaking about 'good gardening' and less about maintenance with its connotations of stasis, in contrast to those of development and growth. At its best 'maintenance' (to use the term) implies the virtues of

custodianship, trusteeship – the care, now and for the future, of our ‘natural’ surroundings.



Maintenance, however, is too often imbued with negative connotations, too often seemingly locked into standardised cost formulas that allow for only standardised, ‘industrialised’ maintenance regimes that to be thought efficient have to be indifferent to the genius loci of individual places.

But maintenance understood as creative, nurturing acts, is the cornerstone of any attempt to work within the grain of nature and to lend it sympathetic assistance. Thus simple changes to maintenance regimes can transform places and, critically, children’s experience of them. Amending mowing regimes, creating access to wilder shrub areas, and accommodating loose parts are but three examples.

A whole school approach

This brief discussion paper suggested some of the issues that need to be considered if schools’ outdoors are to be made, and are to remain, attractive, ‘natural’ spaces enjoyed and valued by the children and staff who will inhabit them. In this context, subservience to simplistic notions of ‘good practice’ can limit a school’s ability to address fundamentals. These fundamentals primarily revolve around attitudes, understandings, and the search for shared meanings of commonly used terms. PLAYLINK’s experience is that these ‘deep’ questions can best be addressed in terms of a ‘whole school’ approach, accepting that this is not a bland, contention-free exercise. It is, however, perhaps a necessary one.



PLAYLINK’s endeavours are directed toward addressing the issues raised here, both at the policy level, and on the frontline, getting our hands dirty.

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