

## Creating and Promoting Outdoor Learning Environments

Carol Duffy

### Introduction

Play and the outdoors naturally complement each other. The outdoors has been our playground and classroom for hundreds of thousands of years. Playing and interacting in the outdoors has provided humans with knowledge, skills, and affinity with nature that has supported the development of our species to date. Yet as this paper suggests we find ourselves in a position where outdoor play has become devalued and under threat from societal and attitudinal changes. Narrow one-dimensional views that box learning environments into indoor classrooms fail to recognise the potential and necessity of holistic outdoor learning environments for young children. Bilton (2004: 4) states "*Outside is a natural environment for children; there is a freedom associated with the space that cannot be replicated inside*".

Consider your childhood, where did you play outdoors? Now consider all the knowledge, life skills, memories, and affinities you were accumulating as you played naturally. As you played independently you learned how to conquer or manage your environment, make and keep friends, assess and take risks, all the while developing affinity with places and spaces that hopefully have stayed with you to this day. Remembering helps us to reconnect and value the learning experiences we may have taken for granted. Just one generation ago it was common to hear adults complain they could not get the children to come in from outdoors; currently it's more common to hear they cannot get the children to go out. Bilton (2004), Louv (2005) and Friedman (2006) express concern at the lack of opportunity for a growing number of children to access and experience play in the outdoors. Changing societal trends see children shifting from outdoor play to more sedentary and solitary indoor pastimes which can have negative implications for their health and well being. It therefore becomes vital that we foster an engagement and affinity with the outdoors from a very early age.

This paper argues that the importance of the outdoors for children's physical and mental health, well-being and development needs to be more widely recognised and promoted. IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, is committed to improving quality within the sector and provides support programmes to practitioners in developing their indoor and outdoor play curriculum.

This small scale action research project draws on data from a sample of early childcare practitioners participating on IPPA training and quality programmes. Three cycles of

research were undertaken,

- 1 researching current outdoor play provision
- 2 documenting how practitioners were supported to develop their outdoor learning environments and create learning stories
- 3 investigating the potential of the learning story (Carr, 2001) as a medium to promote outdoor play.

### **Context**

As part of my work with IPPA as a Training and Quality Specialist, I became concerned at the general poor provision for outdoor play witnessed within the sector. My interest and love of the natural world drew me to the increasing number of emerging theories on the importance and potential of nature and outdoor play for children's development, health and well-being. Delivering IPPA's Quality Improvement Programme, I was familiar with the concept of 'Learning Stories' (Carr, 2001). These are short narratives which identify children's learning. An integral element of the quality programme consists of supporting practitioners to develop learning stories. These stories combine images and text for the purpose of sharing children's learning. An adaptation of this model afforded opportunities to support the creation and promotion of outdoor learning environments by showing the children actively learning outdoors through an emergent play curriculum. So an action research question was born, entitled: Are learning stories an effective tool to promote outdoor play for young children?

### **Literature Review**

The research was underpinned by two strands of thinking. Moore (1997); Ouvre (2000); Bilton (2005) and Louv (2005) are all advocates of outdoor play and nature experiences for children. Their theories indicate the importance of engagement with nature and outdoor play for children's development, well being, physical, and mental health. Bilton (2004: 7) states that "*Children in a good outdoor play area will appear active, absorbed, motivated, and purposeful - a very satisfying sight.*"

The World Forum on Early Care and Education held a working forum on Nature Education in 2006. Dana Friedman's report on collected ideas from this forum states "*Nature is crucial for total development of the whole child, regardless of stage, ability, or problem.*" The report goes on to acknowledge the importance of the provision of natural settings for play and exploration: "*Children's pretend play outdoors in natural settings tends to be more complex/therapeutic than indoors*" (Friedman, 2006). This is a timely reminder as many of the outdoor spaces being provided are little more than rubber-matted sterile enclosures.

The second strand of this research revolved around the adaptation of Carr's (2001) 'Learning Stories' model. Learning stories are short narratives that identify the learning experiences children have on a daily basis in childcare settings. They were designed as a learning assessment tool. The model is adapted by placing the focus on combined images and narratives, which demonstrate an emergent outdoors curriculum in action. They simultaneously inform and promote as they celebrate the children as learners and explorers of their world. Alterio and Mc Drury (2003) claim that storytelling and life stories provide potent learning tools for adult learners.

### **Methodology**

An emancipatory action research model underpinned this research (Lynch, 2000; Mc Niff, 2000.) The research was carried out with the practitioners as opposed to on them. The practitioners were research partners in what Lynch (2000) describes as a 'research coalition'. Involving the practitioners in the research empowered them towards transformative action. Qualitative data was gathered by means of interviews, discussion groups, observations, on site visits to services, and digital and video recordings. The project had three research cycles.

#### **Cycle 1:**

Ten early years practitioners based in Dublin, Kildare, and Meath, who were undertaking an IPPA training programme were interviewed in relation to their outdoor provision. Data was also gathered by means of discussion groups from participants on three outdoor play workshops undertaken in Dublin, Tipperary, and Clare. A cross section of urban, rural, sessional, and full day care was represented.

#### **Cycle 2:**

Due to the limited scope of the project, a smaller cohort of three childcare centres were involved in this cycle. The practitioners in these services attended workshops on outdoor play and developing learning stories. They each received an on site support visit. In each of the centres the practitioners and I jointly developed learning stories that demonstrated their emergent outdoor play curriculum in action.

#### **Cycle 3:**

This cycle documented one centre's presentation to parents. A parents' evening was arranged and a powerpoint presentation of the learning stories was made. Twenty-one parents attended. Sixty-five percent of the children had a parent attend. After the presentation, an informal discussion took place over coffee. Comments from the parents were noted during this discussion. One week later, the practitioners were interviewed in relation to the process.

## **Findings**

### **Cycle 1**

#### **Main findings from interviews and discussions:**

There was little value placed on the outdoors as a learning environment. Fresh air and exercise were the benefits identified by the majority. Difficulties with ratios, staffing, weather, attitudes, surfaces and equipment were cited. Conflicting interpretations of the Childcare Regulations by both practitioners and statutory inspection teams were problematic. Practitioners expressed concern at regular parental requests for children to be kept indoors/ or kept clean. There was little or no explicit promotion of the benefits of outdoor play by the practitioners. No specific outdoor play policies or strategies were documented.

#### **Main Findings from observations:**

Two of the centres had well designed and equipped outdoor areas, which were hives of activity during my visits. The practitioners interacted well with the children. I observed them building dens, playing catch, and sitting chatting.

Of the other centres, three of the sessional services had no access to outdoor space, two had limited access to a school yard, the remaining three had outdoor spaces that were underutilised. In general, the design and layout of the spaces was poor. Equipment and materials were predominantly plastic slides, trikes, or playhouses. The interactions centred on supervising slides, walking around with the children, and playing circle games. In all of the centres the outdoor play times were instigated by the adults.

### **Cycle 2:**

Specific training supports were put in place to improve the quality of outdoor provision before the learning stories were developed. These included two workshops, one on outdoor play, the other on developing learning stories. These were followed by an on site support visit. Tracking one centre during the training process, they had improved the layout of their outdoor space, added extra open ended play materials and courageously changed the whole routine of the playgroup by offering the choice of indoor or outdoor play to the children throughout the morning. This centre was chosen to partake in the third research cycle. Two months after the training sessions were completed, I revisited the centre to gather video and digital images of the children at play. Learning stories were jointly developed from these images, and a parents' evening was planned.

### **Cycle 3**

This was the first parents' evening held by the centre and I supported the team on the evening by co presenting the learning story. As can be seen from the following comments it was very successful and raised awareness of the children's learning.

**Comments from Parents after Presentation**

*"I never thought about their play like that before. I just sent them out to play."*

*"I have to be honest I sent my child to playgroup just to socialise and thought it didn't matter if he missed days as he was only playing, I now see how much he is learning and how important it is for him that he attends."*

*"I felt so proud of him when Carol<sup>1</sup> was showing us how he helped the other children, I hadn't noticed before how much he knew about building. He must have been watching his dad and uncles."*

*"It brought me back to all the things we used to play outdoors and how much fun we had, my little girl loves playing outside just like I did."*

*"I couldn't believe that someone had come from Dublin to this little playgroup and was telling us these wonderful things about our kids playing."*

One week later, I discussed with the practitioners the impact of the process. They felt it had improved their teamwork and raised their morale. They themselves had a much greater appreciation of the benefits of outdoor play and felt better able to articulate it to parents. The new routine which offered the choice of outdoor play was working really well, but it brought with it a few teething problems; specifically managing the additional mucky shoes and the frequent dressing and undressing for outdoors. New learning stories were being written which they felt really focused them on the children's play. They were following the children's interests more and providing more natural and open ended materials. It was summed up by one of the practitioners *"We are outdoors much more. It's exhausting sometimes, but I love it"*.

**Challenges Identified:**

The importance and value of outdoor learning environments is not well recognised. Attitudinal change towards outdoor play is required by many parents, practitioners, and policy makers. It is interesting to note that the centres in this study who provided quality outdoor environments were staffed by people who had a genuine interest in and love of the outdoors. They came into the job with a positive disposition towards outdoor experiences for children. The number of limiting and unsuitable outdoor environments in childcare centres is a cause for concern. As many children are spending longer hours in full day care, and centres care for larger numbers of children, the importance of providing spacious, natural, outdoor environments increases. Too often outdoor space appears to be given the last and least consideration.

**Note:**

1 Pseudonym

Practitioners benefit from specific training and support that empowers them to create, utilise, and promote outdoor learning environments. High levels of support and resources are needed in many centres to instigate the major changes needed. With attitudinal change however, many inexpensive improvements could be made instantly.

### **Recommendations**

The valuing of outdoor learning environments needs to happen across the board by parents, early years practitioners, the pre-school services inspectorate, designers and architects. Training and support for practitioners and the inspectorate is required in

1. Valuing the role and potential of the outdoor learning environment
2. Design and layout of outdoor space
3. Articulation of the rationale/benefits of outdoor play and experiences
4. Outdoor activities and experiences

### **Conclusions**

Based on my findings, I would have to concur that learning stories are an effective tool in promoting outdoor play. Developing and sharing the learning stories not only contributed to the development of the childcare centres involved, it informed parents and helped to raise the value of children's play. The research has highlighted the urgent need within the early childcare and education sector to examine and improve the current outdoor provision for young children. Realistically for this to occur, the value and importance of outdoor learning environments has to gain greater recognition.

An unforeseen outcome of this research was that it provided IPPA with the material and impetus to develop and publish a book *Nurture Through Nature* (IPPA, 2006) for practitioners and parents which promotes outdoor play. Drawing from this research the book, through the medium of learning stories, shows children's experiences in a range of outdoor environments, explores possibilities in relation to creating outdoor learning environments, and raises awareness of its benefits. The publication enables the vital message to reach a wider audience.

This conference theme of Vision into Practice aimed to examine ways that we can make quality a reality in the lives of young children. My *vision into practice* is the provision of quality outdoor environments in every childcare centre in Ireland. This project has shown how to put *practice into vision* through image-rich learning stories and the benefits derived from them.

## References

- Alterio, M. and Mc Drury, J. (2003). *Learning Through Storytelling in Higher Education Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Bilton, H. (2004). *Playing Outside*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Friedman, D. (2006). *Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children. Report on Collected Ideas*. [Accessed at [http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/wf2006\\_nature/collected\\_ideas.php](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/wf2006_nature/collected_ideas.php), 16th January, 2007].
- IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation (2006). *Nurture through Nature*. Dublin: IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation.
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last Child in the Woods: Nature Deficit Disorder*. North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Lynch, K. (2000). Equality Studies, the Academy and the Role of Research in Emancipatory Social Change. *The Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 41-69, reprinted in Mc Niff, J., Mc Namara, G. and Leonard, D. (Eds.). *Action Research in Ireland*. Dorset: September Books.
- Mc Niff, J. (2002). *Action Research Principles and Practice*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Moore, R. and Wong, H. (1997). *Natural Learning: Creating Environments for Rediscovering Nature's Way of Teaching*. Berkeley, California: MIG Communications.
- Ouvry, M. (2000). *Exercising Muscles and Minds: Outdoor Play and the Early Years Curriculum*. London: National Early Years Network.