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Teaching and learning outside the classroom: personal values, alternative pedagogies and standards

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The article reports on a recent survey of 334 settings in a county in the South West of England and five case studies exploring current practice and aspirations for learning outdoors for children between the ages of 2 to 11. Practitioners' aspirations for outdoor learning appear to go beyond providing fresh air and 'letting off steam' and include alternative pedagogies and enrichment for the curriculum. This paper critically evaluates the implications of personal values associated with the outdoors including freedom and fun; ownership and autonomy; authenticity; love of rich sensory environment and physicality for pedagogical practice. Yet, barriers to the full exploitation of the potential of outdoor learning remain and some of the tensions reported between personal values and the drive for improving standards continues in the UK are examined.

Keywords: outdoor learning; pedagogy; learning outside the classroom; affective education; values; performativity

Introduction

In this paper, I look at how demands for attention to standards and practitioners' personal values compete in realising alternative pedagogies suited to outdoor contexts. I critically evaluate the pedagogical value of enjoyment, a form of 'desire', which implies positive affective and motivational qualities. Positive affective elements featured in outdoor learning are then explored. Focusing on provision taking place outside for children aged between 2 and 11 years in a rural county in England, I examine what practitioners aspire to achieve in outdoor learning (their values for outdoor learning) and the extent to which they appear to offer alternative pedagogy (as exemplified in their reported activities). Finally, I summarise the tensions they experience in offering alternative pedagogies in the prevailing context in English education.

Educational policy context

An individual autonomous approach to teaching widespread in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to a more centrally determined structure with the advent of the National Curriculum in 1988 in the UK. Since then, a series of education strategies (e.g. DfEE 1998, 1999) have been implemented with a common tendency to address instances of poor teaching by a homogenisation of teaching approaches. The dominant

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pedagogy, if it can be so described, includes high levels of structure, teacher-led learning and prescribed whole-class activities; it represents a teaching method rather than a pedagogy informed by values and context. More directive and directed teaching methods were introduced as part of a back to basics drive to raise standards but have been criticised as reflecting a technicist approach to teaching and learning (Pring 2001; Alexander 2004). Furthermore they imply a view of knowledge as transmissible at odds with socio-constructivist ideas about the co-construction of knowledge as a mediation between what is offered and what is received. An instructivist model of teaching (Duffy and Jonassen 1991), exemplified by scripted teaching in the US and whole class didactic teaching in the Literacy Strategy in the UK, oversimplifies complex relationships where learning is constructed in interactions through class discussion, collaborative working, and activities that are relevant and contingent to the learners' prior knowledge and experience (Vygotsky 1962). More recently and still within an overarching agenda of standards and school improvement, another initiative was launched within the Primary National Strategy, 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (DfES 2003) and related subsequently developed continuing professional development materials (DfES 2004). They were intended to support new approaches to learning and teaching built upon local identification of priorities for improvement and the engagement of staff and students in learning through enjoyment (Waite, Carrington, and Passy 2005; Passy and Waite 2008). The underlying assumption is two-fold in that learning is seen as occurring through interaction between individuals within specific communities (Lave and Wenger 1991), hence situated and local. But it is further refined by the role that teachers are given in providing creative and stimulating facilitation for learning, a co-constructivist approach (Vygotsky 1962). In an earlier research project (Waite, Carrington, and Passy 2005) evaluating the *Excellence and Enjoyment* CPD materials, the head teacher of an inner city school had purchased professional DJ record decks to engage his primary school pupils in positive attitudes to school and learning. His love of music was caught by rather than taught to the pupils through their mutual enjoyment. Their shared co-construction of meaning and motivation for learning to be a DJ had wider reaching effects on the engagement in learning of pupils in his school, illustrating a facilitative role of 'desire' in the co-construction of learning and teaching.

Resultant changes in learning and teaching may therefore provide a means of incorporating driving up of standards through a re-awakening of joy in learning (Waite and Rea 2007). However, these twin aims of excellence and enjoyment are seen both in support and conflict by staff. The weight on standards accorded by the priority of 'Excellence' over 'Enjoyment' in the title of the document (DfES 2003) set against the positioning of learning before teaching in the text, with its implied change in emphasis to learning of children rather than teaching methods, suggests that some ambivalence remains around whether enjoyment is really advocated as the route to desired improvement. Is emotion being harnessed to the plough of standards, a daunting enough prospect in itself, or as Hartley suggests, merely providing consumer glossiness to the performance of educational production, a 'personalised standardisation' (2006, 13). Teachers remain caught between perceived risks of resisting a system judged by narrow assessment criteria and an apparent warrant to embrace self-determination and develop ways to enthuse learners in their particular context (Webb and Vuillamy 2007; Passy and Waite 2008). Alexander (2004) argues that the government's interventionist approach to education understandably makes teachers wary.

So although broader *aims* for pedagogy, including affective concepts such as enjoyment and well being, are beginning to be seen by some as supportive of improvement, do they, in practice, necessarily lead to alternative *forms* of pedagogy from those previously recommended (Alexander 2004)? Research would suggest that teachers still experience conflict in adopting creative approaches while performance remains a strong factor in the judgement of schools (Woods et al. 1997; Waite, Carrington, and Passy 2005). One might anticipate that conflict will be greater when perceived aims for teaching and learning narrow to a subject-based curriculum after the early years foundation stage (DfES 2007) which is premised on a higher degree of choice for teacher and child in how the curriculum is enacted.

Learning and enjoyment

Nevertheless, there is evidence that enjoyment and autonomy of choice contribute to improved learning and the application of that learning. For example, Erk et al. (2003) found words stored in a positive emotional context were remembered better than those in neutral or negative contexts, so that what children wish to learn and enjoy learning will be better retained than what they have no choice about. Furthermore, Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that emotional content not only reinforces memory but also makes learning accessible to important social uses. Their studies of adults with brain damage show that, although they have cognitive awareness of facts, without an emotional element they are unable to use that information to make successful judgments and decisions in their life. (See Waite (2007) in this journal for further discussion of the role of affect in memory.) Spitzer (2006) reminds us that the brain is always learning and that it is not just in designated contexts such as the classroom that this occurs. Play, especially for younger children, is an essential mode of learning, but children and staff may not always recognise alternative modes as ‘learning’ unless they share characteristics of the formal. In Waite and Davis (2007), children in nursery classes aged 4 and 5 taken to Forest Schools identified factual knowledge or skill gains but not creative benefits such as storytelling or child-initiated practical science activities as ‘learning’. It is as if the mediation of a teacher has become integral to their perception of learning and that natural experiential learning of earlier childhood has been displaced by the structure of classroom practice. So, if assessment in the later years of primary schooling remains tied to tightly defined cognitive outcomes, broader learning opportunities may not be recognised, acknowledged or encouraged by practitioners. Yet, perhaps these opportunities for enjoyment and diverse learning outcomes might continue to be made available in outdoor contexts.

Outdoor contexts for teaching and learning

Children’s experience of enjoyment in the outdoors is widely reported (Millward and Whey 1997; Armitage 2001; Waite and Rea 2007). Policy for learning outside the classroom in England has recently been set out in the *Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto* (DfES 2006) and benefits such as physical (Pellegrini and Smith 1998) and emotional and social well being (Perry 2001) are claimed. Learning outdoors is an expectation within the early years foundation stage for children from birth to five (DfES 2007) but Rickinson et al. (2004) argue that there is a lack of consensus about what ‘outdoor education’ comprises. One current debate is whether learning

outdoors is or should be of the same kind as that more usually encountered inside (Rea 2008), thereby providing a seamless experience for children (DfES 2007). However, Edgington (2002) suggests that the sheer scale of the outdoors necessarily changes the sort of learning experiences children have. Furthermore, part of the allure of the outdoors may lie in the departure from the familiar context of the classroom and traditional forms of learning (Broderick and Pearce 2001; Rea 2008). Certainly Waite and Davis (2007) noted how free play and child-initiated exploration of the natural environment appeared to engage children to a greater extent than adult-led activities in Forest School. The children demonstrated high levels of involvement, which are considered to signal that deep learning is taking place (Pascal and Bertram 1997). There are indications, therefore, that learning is affected by the outdoor context, but does being outside necessarily change the pedagogy employed in that context to one which incorporates greater choice and enjoyment for learners?

Research context

The research reported in this paper followed earlier work for a local authority evaluating the impact of Forest Schools for children aged 3–5 years (Waite and Davis 2007). It sought to contextualise those previous findings by exploring the role that outdoor learning had or might have from the perspective of mainstream settings for children aged 2–11 years within a rural county. The research had two parts:

- Postal surveys to all childminders (n = 898, r = 77, rr = 9%), 'preschools' i.e. play groups and day nurseries (n = 427, r = 120, rr = 28%) and primary schools (n = 439, r = 128, rr = 29%) in the county regarding their provision and aspirations for outdoor learning (Waite, Davis, and Brown 2006a). A further nine questionnaires were received from out of school clubs which have not been included in this paper. [n = number, r = respondents, rr = response rate]
- Case studies of five settings, a childminder, play group, day nursery, foundation stage and primary school[1] to explore provision and aims in more detail (Waite, Davis, and Brown 2006b).

The survey (in two forms to address provision for 2–5 and 6–11 age groups) provided an overview of practice and principles regarding outdoor learning from 334 settings (19% response rate overall). Sections of the survey were as follows: background information about the respondent and setting; the physical environment; current policy and practice; aspirations for outdoor learning. Schools had the highest rate of response (29%), while only 9% of childminders replied. This may be partly attributed to difficulties in obtaining up to date contact details for this somewhat shifting workforce. Higher response rates might have been achieved by using the Childminders Association rather than local authority as the distributors of the survey.

Case studies were selected from survey responses and through discussion with local authority early years advisors based on responses that showed interesting and innovative practice in outdoor learning. They included a childminder, preschool, day nursery, foundation stage class and primary school. Mapping, observation, documentary evidence, interviews with staff and children and photographic records were used to gather information and attitudes within different types of setting, producing rich narratives from a variety of perspectives.

Analysis involved:

(1) entry into SPSS for the quantitative elements of the survey;
(2) content analysis derived from repeated reading of open ended comments in the survey, interview and document material by at least two members of the team independently who provisionally identified and then met to agree themes present within the qualitative data; and
(3) entry into N6 (qualitative software) to facilitate the storage and manipulation of the agreed themes.

In the following section, I report our findings related to values from across the research evidence.

Values associated with outdoor learning

Accessing the values of practitioners and children regarding outdoor learning helped us to make sense of the pedagogies and practice reported in the surveys and witnessed in our case study observations. Our content analysis of our qualitative data drew particularly on case study interviews and survey questions such as: *Please describe in detail a memory you have from your childhood of a significant experience in an outdoor setting?*; *What are the three most important factors that contributed in your view to the significance of this experience?*; *What do you feel is the potential for learning outdoors?* We deliberately did not ask a direct question about values in our survey, partly for pragmatic reasons in keeping it to a reasonable length but principally because we considered a phenomenological approach based on actual examples rather than statements of belief would enable us to access values as embodied rather than rhetorical (Stam, Lubek, and Radtke 1998). Our intention was therefore to prompt recollection of specific moments that held some significance in the respondents' lives, thus grounding their comments in physical events and exemplifying how concepts were enacted.

One of the ways we therefore gathered indications of values in our survey was by inviting respondents to share memories of the outdoors (Waite 2007). It is thought that adults' childhood memories of the outdoors may affect the sort of provision they are likely to consider for children in their care (Chawla 1994). Values that emerged from this analysis included: freedom and fun; ownership and autonomy; authenticity; love of rich sensory environment and physicality. These were then employed to consider the extent of their usefulness as an explanatory framework in analysis of the case study observational and interview data. Italicised text has been used to highlight phrases that particularly exemplify the category and accompanying commentary.

Freedom and fun

In this vignette, we see how freedom was important and that the pedagogy adopted was contingent to the child's learning.

> At age of 8 my primary school class went on a nature walk on a piece of common land and woods. We were *allowed to roam* and collect items. The *teacher named the items* and gave details of the natural habitat etc. I still remember the names of plants we looked at even though that was 59 years ago! (Questionnaire, preschool, 624a)

This engagement is echoed in a case study of the childminder's practice in the woodland. In the following comment, her feelings are evident and suggest that this childminder uses her enthusiasm to infect the children with her love of the outdoors and exploratory learning.

> No written plan. I *love* being in the garden, *experimenting*, and growing all sorts, involving the children combines my two *passions* in life. The *excitement* of children seeing seeds germinate, bulbs shoot, plants grow, *having fun* watering, just getting muddy, *feeling* mud, peat, bark, pebbles etc. It's *priceless!* (Childminder case study)

A less tightly structured learning environment was valued by preschool staff not only as a personalised response to some children's needs,

> For the individual it benefits children with behaviour problems as it offers an *open environment* and children *behave differently* because they are so much *freer*. (Preschool case study)

but also because,

> The benefits are that *everybody is free* more, being explorative and creating balance using the curriculum. Outdoor learning allows the curriculum to be seen through a *different view*.
>
> The community benefits by having *happy well rounded* little people outdoors which must surely impact as adults. (Preschool case study)

In the private nursery case study, the teacher in charge commented,

> I believe that the learning, which takes place in the outdoors, particularly in a *natural environment*, is extremely valuable. Many children react very differently when outdoors. They need the *freedom* to explore, to run, just to be. (Private nursery case study)

The head teacher in the foundation stage case study spoke about the connections between outdoor activity and learning.

> We've got to teach our youngsters to be creative in the future, to find their own little niche. [Outdoors they are] creating their own *fun*. They are *involved and happy* and in the future they will be able to continue to be involved and happy. It gives them the creativity to go forward. (Foundation Stage case study, interview with head teacher shown in video by Cranbrook Films Ltd)

In contrast, some responses seemed flat in emotional tone and appeared to be providing outdoor provision principally because it was seen as required.

> We do not have a policy as such, but we do *follow* the *foundation stage curriculum guidance* which *states* that ideally children should have continual access to both indoor and outdoor play spaces. (Questionnaire, preschool, 764a)

Ownership and autonomy

From the survey data, it appeared that most childminders allowed the children quite high levels of involvement in deciding 'whether or not to spend time outdoors', 'what activities will take place outdoors', 'what sorts of behaviour are acceptable outdoors', and 'how to control or modify their outdoor environment'. Comparing

these results to those of schools and preschools, it would seem the children cared for by childminders were given more choice about what activities would take place outdoors. Giving choice to children may derive from the autonomy of the childminder in deciding how days will be organised in comparison to organisations constrained by timetabling and possibly indicate that performance against criteria exert stronger influences in more structured settings. This pressure was mentioned by some school respondents. It may also indicate that childminders value affording autonomy for the children in their care. Children in schools and preschools were most likely to be involved in deciding what sorts of behaviour are acceptable outdoors and least likely to be involved in deciding how to control or modify the outdoor environment.

The case studies, however, illustrated how getting children involved can be a powerful force to improve the impact of outdoor environments and the transferability of learning outdoors into the classroom. For example, in the primary school, the playground was covered with painted markings, chosen by the children. The school not only had a children's council but also a system of 'family groups'; mixed ages met weekly with a member of staff to discuss issues. Children therefore had two possible routes into decision making in the school, through the 'family' staff member at staff meetings and through the 'family group' member of the children's council. They clearly felt that their views had been and continued to be taken into account. They had ongoing involvement with evaluation and improvement of the school, indicating the children's ownership of their learning environment.

However, reported ownership had limits; although a high number of responses stated they had moveable flexible equipment in their outdoor setting and that they 'regularly take indoor equipment outdoors', it was less frequently reported that the children had the freedom or the responsibility to 'take the equipment outdoors themselves'.

Authenticity

The playgroup also used the local community to extend learning opportunities for children outside, for example:

> We do things providing simple *opportunities* i.e. going to the beach, theatre, park, chemist. A few students will also go shopping each week to get the supplies for the setting each week. This will include writing a shopping list, handling the money, finding things in the supermarket and paying for them. (Playgroup case study, staff)

> I think that the important thing is that [playing outdoors] makes [learning] really real for many of the children ... there's lots of links with what they do inside that then *become real* for them outdoors. (Foundation stage case study, head teacher)

The value placed on the opportunity to experience firsthand was evident in one case study from lively displays of the Year 5 farm residential trip and a Year 1 trip to the museum in the school corridors. In contrast, children reported lessons in classrooms were sometimes '*boring*' and they were less inclined to '*believe*' them. It appeared to be very important to the children that they had tested out what they were told. This supports an experiential approach to learning which is less frequently employed in classroom-based and whole class activities. The question of 'belief' in relation to learning is interesting; it suggests that children may approach classroom learning as

different from learning 'in the real world' and this could have implications for the transferability of learning acquired in these settings.

Love of a rich sensory environment

In another reported memory, the sights, smells, tastes and sounds of experiences were vividly reconstructed. The positive emotions evoked may influence how that practitioner plans for outdoor learning (Chawla 1994).

> Woodland beside my house collecting blackberries, camping and cooking on open fire, deep piles of leaves. Helping to pump the water up for the day as we had spring water. Finding and eating wild watercress. Driving down the lanes with grass in the middle – the noise it made as it brushed the underside of the car. What I learnt was to *love* and *enjoy* the outdoors – the *sights and sounds and smells* [bonfires]. (Questionnaire, preschool, 635a)

Malone and Tranter report that 'the child's desire to connect with nature in a meaningful way is more overtly circumscribed by the school philosophy than the lack of resources' (2003, 299). In descriptions of their outdoor learning environments, a private nursery teacher and foundation stage coordinator outline important features, including themes identified in this paper.

> The woodland offers *freedom to explore* a native environment [and it] develops *affinity for the natural world*. Fallen logs or log piles provide endless opportunities for *climbing, balancing*, going over, under and through and [hunting] bug 'n' beasties. The fire pit and the seating area [is a] wonderful setting for *whole group* activities, collecting sticks, building fires, *sitting, thinking and toasting*. (Private nursery case study, teacher)

> Sustainability and spirituality are both part of the school curriculum. We can begin to develop the children's understanding at an early age by teaching them to *love* their planet, *experience* things *deeply, relate* to the outside world and have *real* experiences. We can create a sense of *awe and wonder* by developing their understanding of the outside world, through *interest and excitement* in their environment. (Foundation stage case study, Early Years coordinator)

The role of positive affect in making learning accessible for application in other contexts has been recognised (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). Gardner's work on multiple intelligences (1993) also suggests that naturalistic intelligence may influence the environment's role in learning. Furthermore, sensory contextualisation has been found to be an aid to memory (Gottfried et al. 2004).What is clear from these descriptions is the value placed on the engagement of multiple senses, the importance of the affective dimension and the physicality of the outdoor learning experience.

Physicality

In the following shared memory, the language of 'desire' (Zembylas 2007) emphasises the strength of feeling evoked by taking risks in an environment free from adult intervention.

> I *love*d playing on the adventure play area of the village I lived in. It was situated in a large field by the local hall. We would take *risks* like walking up the see saw, jumping off

> swings, seeing how many rungs we could miss on the bars. It was *lovely* because we didn't have adults there to keep telling us off or be careful. I learnt to balance, climb, push myself a little further with things I could do. (Questionnaire, preschool, 640a)

The impact of these positive memories of risk taking appeared to vary depending on the provider. Most of the childminders reported that their children go outdoors for 'physical activity' on a daily basis for the purpose of:

> *Room to move*, fresh air, children move activity on with regards to conversations, experiences, activities. (Childminder, 1027)
>
> *Freedom of movement* to let off steam, look at the seasons in the natural world, take care of their environment. *Informal* talking about why we leave the crocuses (spring) or cyclamen (autumn) to grow. Scavenger hunts – the children's finds are *special to them*. (Childminder, 1026)

As the comments above show, the respondents also mention aspects of enjoyment and personalisation, referring to informality and freedom. However, some settings reported that risks were now considered too great to allow children physical challenge. One respondent mentioned how adult attitudes had changed with experience.

> Initially we introduced the daily outdoor period to allow the children to *let off steam* – this worked so well, that we now incorporate the additional learning experiences – it also allows us to develop creative activities by allowing more '*experimentation'* without fear of ruining the village hall facilities. (Questionnaire, preschool, 889)

The importance of physical activity was interpreted not just as an opportunity to release energy but also as a means to support creativity.

Practitioners' values in outdoor learning described above influence the pedagogical methods that are explored in more detail below, drawing on the case study observational and interview data.

Associated pedagogy

Child-initiated learning

In the case studies there were many examples of child–directed learning derived from values of freedom and fun, ownership and autonomy. On a single day when 31 activities were observed at the private nursery, 11 were adult-led and nine adult-initiated and 11 child-led. However, the nine adult-initiated activities were adapted by children to their own interests. In all, about two thirds of observed activities were child-directed. In the childminder case study, a child noticed a rock poking out of the earth and proceeded to challenge himself by stepping up onto it to try and balance. He was successful and proud of his achievement. The childminder felt learning opportunities were greater outdoors as it

> allows the children the ability to be able to investigate things which are far more child-initiated rather than adult-led all the time.

In the playgroup case study, the outdoor area had a ramp between the building and the playground, which the children called the 'mountain'; they would take their

tricycles up the ramp and ride them down. Some children persisted with this all the time outside. However, within this free play situation, the staff took the opportunity to encourage learning, for example by pointing out to the children the wheel marks their tricycles made in the sand. This contingent response of staff allowed children's preferred activity to be the site of incidental learning.

Allowing children to lead their learning permits a more personalised pedagogical approach. For example, in the playgroup case study, one of the boys wanted to play in the sandpit, so the playgroup supervisor uncovered it for him. None of the other children joined him at first so she continued to play with him at his chosen activity. On observational visits, his behaviour had been quite difficult within the classroom; he never wanted to join the others or participate in planned activities. Outdoors, he listened to the staff more and displayed more involvement in the activity of digging and filling buckets and sand moulds. After a few minutes in the sandpit, another child joined him. The supervisor explained to him using an egg timer how much time he had remaining outdoors before they had to go back inside. By giving him advanced warning and a time frame, the adult had enabled the child to follow his own interest, develop autonomy and enjoy learning, while supporting him in the self-regulation of his behaviour.

The outdoor learning environment (OLE) described by the reception teacher in the foundation stage case study was widely used for another pedagogical practice, assessment for learning.

> The majority of the time is child-initiated play but we use that time to assess how children are doing with their confidence in attempting something they haven't tried before or particularly any child that is lacking social skills. We can monitor how they are progressing with their attitudes towards other children.

Not being directly involved in the activities, the practitioner was able to identify wider social and emotional aspects of learning which present challenges to assessment by artificially designated times for measurement.

A more responsive pedagogical mode contingent to children's needs was also noted by the head teacher in the foundation stage case study.

> I see the teachers go down there and they stand on the periphery of it. When they see the children engaged, enjoying themselves and fully absorbed in what they are doing, the *teacher plays a secondary part* in their learning. They lend themselves to role-play and extend what [the children] are doing and put a few ideas in their heads and they can encourage them to explore further. So it's really a *guide on the side*, somebody who's there to try and help them take the next stage. But sometimes [the children] are *engrossed* in what they're doing, they're getting so much out of it, it would be a shame to get involved.

However, sometimes adult intervention can reduce the appeal of a child-initiated game. On one occasion at the playgroup, a girl asked for the hoops to be brought out, placed them on the ground and started jumping between them with two friends. When the adult saw this, she decided to get more out and set them up in a circle. She began showing the children how to step and jump between them in a circle. The girls were taking it in turns to be a leader each. The playgroup assistant demonstrated hopping between the hoops, but the children moved away to play elsewhere. Armitage (2001) suggests practitioners need to be very sensitive to the private world

of children's play and when it is appropriate to intervene. Adults taking on the lead in playful learning may cut across aims and context in child-initiated imaginative play. Contributing to, without commandeering, play situations for learning is a delicate skill and may run counter to practitioner's expectations and experience of control inside the setting. Furthermore, settings where sustained shared thinking was encouraged with a large number of the interactions initiated by children provided a strong basis for learning across the curriculum, but the tendency is for more teacher-initiated activity, particularly as the children grow older (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008).

Experiential opportunities

The outdoors offers tactile elements and flexible resources with which to experiment and discover real life hands-on learning. These qualities particularly endorse values such as authenticity, love of rich sensory environments and physicality. In the private nursery, a boy persisted with tremendous concentration in a self-designed activity taking water from the bottom of the water tray and pouring it down a length of guttering back into the water tray. Occasionally, he rearranged the guttering in a V shape and poured the water down one side; it had the momentum to go up the other side part way. An adult reflected to him that the water went down and then up the other side. He repeated his actions and this time the water went higher. He carried on increasing the amount of water in his bucket until the water flowed all the way up the second length of guttering and over the end in a waterfall onto the ground. He did this several times before he rearranged the guttering and began a different experiment. His persistence with the activity may have been sustained because it was his own curiosity that had stimulated it, but the learning potential was extended by an adult's comments. In the childminder case study, similar scientific speculation was supported by sensitive contingent responses from an adult when differently weighted objects were thrown into a river and the children were prompted to notice varying sounds and splashes. The children were viewed as active learners capable of understanding the world, so that knowledge is not viewed as transferred but created through social interaction. It represents a co-constructivist pedagogy constructed between child, adult and place in creating learning opportunities through direct experience.

Affective elements

As I have argued, pedagogy is informed by values and context. Affective elements are exhibited throughout the dominant pedagogies described which privileged child-directed and experiential learning and their associated values of freedom and fun, ownership and autonomy, authenticity, love of rich sensory environments and physicality.

On one occasion in the private nursery, a child was upset. An adult went at the child's pace and praised her as she negotiated the steps down into the woodland. Adults showed that they enjoyed being outdoors, drawing attention to things of interest, reminding children about previous visits, asking questions, observing the children's responses and explaining things in a variety of ways. This modelling of pleasure in being outdoors echoes Zembylas' (2007) contention that adults need to share their enthusiasms to successfully teach; affective behaviour in adults being

reflected in an affective experience for children. Emotional engagement in learning may be important for the transfer of learning to other contexts (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007).

The particular affordance of the outdoors is illustrated in the playgroup case study, where some changes in children were noted between being indoors and outdoors. For example, one child was observed to be very quiet and happy to be by herself when she chose to be indoors. However, outdoors on the tricycles, she became a very different girl; she was loud and involved with the other children with a huge smile on her face, chasing everyone while on her tricycle. This suggests that the context in itself may contribute to pedagogical opportunities; the indoors and outdoors may access different aspects of a child's personality and therefore both may be needed to provide a holistic education for that individual.

Devolved responsibility for themselves and others amongst the children at the foundation stage case study helped establish their interdependence and independence. Older children acted as helpers or mentors in the Outdoor Learning Environment at lunchtime. This 'family' approach was also evident in the primary school with older children volunteering to become lunchtime assistants to support other children's play. The childminder also actively created situations where the children were responsible for themselves and their learning. Although these values also underpinned the indoor context, it appeared that adults felt permitted to take a less controlling role in teaching and learning outdoors. The different relationships between adult and children that were created by a relaxation of adult control may have been instrumental in helping children to feel involved and active in their learning and incorporating broader social benefits (Re'em 2001). Yet, despite these positive evaluations, there remain some tensions in the provision of outdoor learning as discussed in the following section drawing on data from the questionnaires and case studies.

Tensions between the ideal and real

While some of the tensions apparently lie in relation to tangible resources available in some settings (some preschools, for example, mentioned not having on-site facilities for outdoor learning), even with similar constraints, there were other respondents who had found ways to access the outdoors, suggesting that barriers are socially constructed and rooted in attitudes and response to risk. Barriers to the development of outdoor learning reported across all respondents to the survey included funding (mentioned in 131 responses), adult attitudes (in 101 responses), the nature of the space available (in 71 responses), external factors such as safety, climate, etc (in 54 responses). However, while settings for younger children reported congruence in their outdoor learning practice with government guidance and frameworks, there were indications of tensions with external demands to prioritise raising achievement in primary schools.

Standards agenda

Ninety-six percent of schools completing the 2–5 form of the survey (n = 77) had plans to develop outdoor learning compared to a lower figure of 83% of schools responding to the 6–11 form (n = 51). This may be due to the prominence of outdoor learning in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2003)

and a perceived clash with National Curriculum requirements for older children. About 1 in 5 schools in this survey for the older age group did not have plans for development, which is somewhat surprising given high ratings for the potential of learning outdoors noted below. However, it may also indicate the presence of other pressing priorities in schools. Sixty-two percent of school-based respondents (n = 128) rated the potential for learning outdoors as excellent with a further 34% rating it as good. This represents a strong endorsement of the potential value of outdoor learning. Coverage of 'other curriculum areas' such as science, maths and geography outdoors became less frequently the case at Key Stage 2 where about one in 10 schools reported that it was rare (i.e. occurring only once or twice a year), which may indicate increasing conflict with performance criteria as children get older. This narrower interpretation of outdoor learning's potential benefits contrasted with the broader affective values reported in the survey and the generic learning benefits of which the case study practitioners spoke.

Indeed, the head teacher in the primary school case study felt that the standard assessment tests and performance pressures currently suppressed a will to make use of the outdoors:

> There is a discrepancy between ... some of the sound bites in *Excellence and Enjoyment* and the inspection processes in this country. But I think that it may also be up to the school to manage the inspection process to point out where it has moved its outdoor learning towards, and so there is an onus on the school as well to show that that has contributed to the children's development.

It would seem that despite values strongly in support of outdoor learning, the performance imperative dominates a value-based pedagogy when they are seen as conflicting. This is in contrast to research which suggests personal values may impede change in practice (Keichtermans 2005). It may point to a suppressed personal theoretical and moral basis for pedagogical practice, which perhaps may be traced back to a diminution of philosophy of education issues and affective content in criterion-led initial teacher training. Personal values developed through initial teacher education which included greater theoretical and philosophical underpinning may have been eroded by current training models where student teachers are increasingly taught to achieve competencies rather than critically engage with them. This would have consequences for the development of personal values to interrogate and critique the received 'menu' of pedagogical approaches sanctioned by government (Hartley 2006, 13).

Adult attitudes

This restriction may account for the difficulties some settings had in overcoming barriers to outdoor learning. McKendrick (2005) found two major barriers to school grounds improvement, (1) lack of time and (2) lack of money, and settings in our study also reported different levels of resources and facilities as a constraint but the determining factor for children's access to the outdoors appeared to be the adults' will to make it happen. Some settings maximised what they had got through using their imagination and putting hard work into making their own resources and planning, while advocating its benefits to colleagues and parents. On the other hand, dwelling on barriers rather than opportunities appeared to have a significant impact on the uptake of outdoor learning in some settings. Perhaps, a lack of prioritisation

for learning outdoors accounted for why some settings did not reply to the survey but we cannot know what accounted for that lack of prioritisation. While Ward Thompson et al. (2005) found that memories of childhood visits to woodland were highly predictive of adult patterns of use, later changes in attitude can be achieved. Murray and O'Brien (2005) found adults themselves engaging in outdoor learning (Forest School) resulted in changes in their perception, attitude and practice towards it. The student in our private nursery case study reflected that her childhood had been '*wrapped in cotton wool*' and she was consequently cautious outdoors as a child but her work in the nursery had required her to leave her '*comfort zone*'. Her enthusiasm had been awakened and now influenced her pedagogy.

Transforming pedagogy

Thus, the passion of individuals in the case study settings transformed less than ideal situations into ones loaded with potential. Their enthusiasm was underpinned by a firm conviction in the value of outdoor learning. It appeared to offer something distinct, which may also fundamentally enrich the curriculum or activities undertaken indoors. The children's demeanour and testimony bore witness to their love of the outdoors. Some staff's belief in its value was further demonstrated by their persistence and willingness to overcome obstacles to ensure access for children to the outdoors.

Another very important aspect of our findings was the levels of involvement of children in planning and use of outdoors. This seemed to ensure a greater sense of ownership, more engagement and higher levels of usage. Moore and Wong (1997) found evidence for lasting academic and behavioural effects on those children involved in the development of diverse school grounds. Flexible resources which could adapt to children's interests seemed imperative.

Flexibility was also important in terms of how staff support learning in the outside. Achieving a delicate balance of intervention is even more crucial in a freer outside environment requiring staff to show considerable sensitivity to the appropriateness of free and structured activity at different points in children's play and learning. Play training employs pedagogical approaches distinct from class-based education and might help practitioners to develop contingent responsive modes of supporting child-initiated learning (McKendrick 2005).

Risk is a big issue in today's society but practitioners stressed the need for and importance of challenge and exploratory learning in order to develop a risk-aware and competent child. Indoor environments are often controlled by adults who establish the code for behaviour and levels of noise. The relative freedom afforded in outdoor contexts seems to contribute to behavioural, personal and social development. There appears to be higher levels of devolution of responsibility to children for their own learning in outdoor contexts, albeit in risk-assessed and managed environments. However, it is likely that the nature of learning opportunities will depend on the attitudes of practitioners and that confident and experienced teachers will provide more challenging activities (OFSTED 2004).

Finally, enjoyment and engagement of the whole child was common across all the case studies. Staff and children saw benefits which encompassed physical, personal, social and curricular aspects. Observations often noted the complete absorption of children in outdoor activities, thereby releasing practitioners from tight control of all aspects of the learning environment.

As Waite and Davis (2007) noted, more research is needed about the transfer of pedagogy adopted in outdoor contexts to the classroom, and we have recently embarked on a two year ESRC funded project to explore opportunities afforded by the outdoors in smoothing the transition between foundation stage and Key Stage 1 (children aged 4–6). It is suggested that freedom to engage emotionally with material to be learnt is vital for that learning to be of practical value in life (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007) and that emotions must infuse successful teaching (Zembylas 2007). Therefore, pedagogy should embrace values and contexts which afford personal engagement and enjoyment for both child and practitioner. However, although the personal values associated with outdoor learning that are reported in this paper appear to support the development of alternative pedagogies, it would seem that years of being told what to do and how to do it may have buried values or even prevented their genesis. Our research suggests that it is 'guidance' perceived as *requirement* that provides a more potent steer for practitioners because of the fear of being judged by adherence to external criteria rather than the quality of pedagogy and learning per se (Alexander 2004). As Hartley (2006) comments, the apparent choice for teachers and students is only within a tightly controlled framework. Economic imperatives continue to drive educational policy, and indeed are likely to further intensify with the prospective squeeze on public spending in the economic downturn.

Conclusion

The research described has pointed to ways in which the pedagogies employed in an outdoor context echo socio-constructivist principles in *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES 2003). However, it is acknowledged that only a small proportion of settings responded to the survey and it may be that these are a subset of provision embracing the educational possibilities of the outdoors. Even within settings selected for case study as showing 'enthusiasm both of the students and teachers involved in the [...] way of working; for it to seem to improve learning; and for changes in practice to feel doable and sustainable over time' (Fielding et al. 2005), there were barriers and examples of attachment to dominant pedagogical practice, which suggest that external pressures may be influencing practice more than internally generated values. The values expressed by practitioners included freedom, fun, authenticity, autonomy and physicality and were reflected in examples of child-led, real-life experiential pedagogies engaging the enthusiasm of children and adults. Nevertheless, these examples were framed by an acute awareness of external requirements and at times conflict was reported between personal aspirations and practice, the ideal and the real. In Deleuze-Guatarrian thinking, while infinite potentialities are present for more creative teaching and learning, the structure of the current standards agenda may impose limitations (Bogue 1989). It would appear that 'the pedagogy of principle has yet to be rescued from the pedagogy of pragmatism and compliance' (Alexander 2004, 29). Yet opportunities for alternative pedagogies outside the classroom were clearly demonstrated and if enjoyment is to be a route to improvements in education in England, consideration should be given to how ingrained attitudes and practice might be modified. Some practitioners have reported an experience of 'freedom' outside the classroom (Waite and Davis 2007) and expressed rich enjoyment in their memories of outdoor learning. Children begin life as exploratory learners and enjoy the rich experiential qualities of outdoor contexts,

but a re-awakening of values-based pedagogy in practitioners may be fundamental to maximising the possibilities for alternative pedagogies and enjoyment within outdoor learning.

Note

1. Childminders may have children from babies through to school-aged children after school. Play groups tend to have children aged between three and four, while day nurseries may also have some younger children. Foundation stage classes have children between four and five years old. The primary school data includes pupils aged between 6 and 11.

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