



PLACE, PEDAGOGY AND PLAY

Participation, Design
and Research with Children

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FOREWORD

PEDAGOGY OF PLACE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

When children play, do they learn? “Yes,” would be the expected answer from child development experts and early childhood educators, and hopefully, parents. Positive responses from professionals not directly engaged with children and the public at large are probably less likely. Perhaps the question should be more often asked. If we agree that children do learn through play, are *where* they play and the physical characteristics of those places important? This question is seldom asked and poorly understood.

Recently, I tagged along with a half-dozen four-year-olds, their teacher and a student intern, in a small remnant woodland situated just beyond the boundary fence of the licensed area of a large child development center. In the quarter-acre paradise, informal paths had been cleared and edged with pieces of tree trunks and limbs, which sometimes ballooned out to form additional activity areas. Some were equipped with large tree trunk slices, laid horizontally to support kids’ investigations. “Research tools” included recycled plastic receptacles, bottles, hand-lenses, and steel-bladed scissors. The teachers let kids roam freely, solo or in groups, exploring and discovering whatever attracted their attention. Within moments, kids were digging in the leaf litter, turning over logs, peeling decomposing bark, digging into rotting wood with scissors, clearly fascinated by the material transformations they made and the small animals they found.

Teachers stayed in the background keeping a watchful eye, joining in when the children’s attention focused on something specific, using Socratic, inquiry-based probing. What did you find? What color is it? What’s that along the edge of the body? Legs? How many? Are they all used at once? Children trap the centipede-like insect in a bottle for closer inspection. The student teacher discusses with another child the curvy grooves on the inside of bark separated from a fallen log and asks what made them.

The two-fold advantage of the woodland was its easy access from the childcare center and the fact that it was an unkempt landscape, with a mix of deciduous trees and conifers, some fallen and left to decompose, together with a diverse understory—a biosystem of readable markers of seasonal cycles and the passage of time. To the casual observer the place would appear similar to any patch of Piedmont woodland in North Carolina. However, through the play and learning experiences of children with their teachers, the woods have been psychologically transformed into a well-loved place full of meaning, reinforcing the childcare center’s bio-identity. Intervention was a looping, rough-and-ready pathway to help children discover some of the infinite affordances of the place. The freedom and imagination of these children was also expressed in natural shelter constructions, pretend animal habitats, and homes for other imagined beings.

Teachers facilitated, extended, and deepened discovery, encouraging close observation, responding to questions, inventing ways to capture, observe, describe, count, and use words related to animal and plant parts, sounds of nature, qualities of ever-changing light, the sensation of air on one’s face, and the behavior of autumn leaves floating gently to the ground. Play and learning experiences were taken back to the classroom for further steps in the learning process: observing more closely, making drawings, listening to a related teacher-read story. Each

woodland trip adds layers of individual meaning and collective meaning for the class. A new kid, just arrived from a foreign land, experiences the woodland as a social link with another child as they explore wordlessly together, then starting a conversation as they share discoveries, co-creating the pedagogy of the place. Social-emotional learning is palpable when observed first-hand, although not yet well represented in the literature.

The above example of place pedagogy lies at one end of the place biospectrum as a diverse, multi-layered, well-established habitat, requiring minimalist intervention to activate childhood wonder and its extension by mindful teachers. The other end of the place biospectrum is more challenging to activate because it involves the re-naturing of existing childhood spaces to create biodiversity from scratch. Nonetheless, a positive aspect is the possibility of engaging children and youth in the design and management processes that strengthen place affiliation and a sense of ownership. As the majority of children live in cities, conserving local natural places and re-naturing them are equally important. Nature facilitates equity and inclusion by affording many points of entry, offering diverse possibilities for interaction and rich social relations at ground level, regardless of individual special needs or disabilities.

Possible place pedagogy outcomes include health promotion via increased time outdoors as a proxy for physical activity and reduction of sickness (reduced exposure to indoor germs). Adding nature can dramatically increase body-in-space affordances and thus fitness. The adaptability of nature can support wide-ranging learning styles, especially for kids intolerant of sitting in classroom chairs for long periods. For them, outdoor hands-on learning can be transformed through memory and applied to new situations back in the classroom and beyond. Tacit, experiential learning through play in nature supports cognitive development. Children know things because they confidently perform actions on their environment and observe the results—in other words gain agency, now recognized as crucial to successful human development. Hands-on science happens in front of their eyes. Diverse action in nature motivates literacy.

As human society enters the Anthropocene and faces the enormous challenges of climate change, guided by OECD's *Future of Education and Skills 2030*, we must re-examine the role of learning, education, and schools in the volatile digital era, where acquiring social values may be more important than learning skills. In this regard, the timely publication of *Place, Pedagogy and Play* must be applauded. The book's interdisciplinary contents bridging research, practice, and policy take us a long step forward towards a new vision of holistic childhood based on the integration of play, learning, and education; and, I would emphasize, the need for place pedagogies intimately entwined with nature. Supportive, international policy already exists in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Together, they provide portals for national and local policy to shape the long-term health of Planet Earth and its human inhabitants. Action is imperative!

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