

Abstract

The nature of relations between learning and environments has exercised the minds of philosophers and researchers since at least the time of Plato's Academy and it remains a question that fascinates educators, human geographers, and neuroscientists. As cities grow and children's activities are increasingly restricted to places that are designed and controlled by adults, researchers warn that learning-environment relations are no longer of purely academic interest however. Compelling evidence now suggests that Western children's physical, mental and social wellbeing is at risk. In response, advocates highlight the ways structural factors constrain children's ability to access and use outdoor areas and, today, emerging evidence indicates that they are having some success in driving change. Institutional adjustments are being made. For example, recent Australian legislation requires early childhood centres and schools to provide environments that enhance outdoor play opportunities. Simultaneously however, some reformers suggest reducing the time available for schoolyard play and extending periods of direct instruction. Leading thinkers are calling for a reorientation of 21st century education however. Rather than delivering more instruction, they advocate moving from an emphasis on teaching predetermined content to a focus on developing the dispositions and competencies that enable learning. Internationally, there is renewed emphasis on the role of learning environments in transforming education, but to date, interest is concentrated on built forms, curriculum content and teacher pedagogies. Indeed little research documents relations between learning, children's self-chosen activities and the objects, meanings and practices that constitute schoolyard activity. As a result the hidden curriculum of many school grounds continues to express 19th century 'child saving' models.

Grounds for Learning responds to contemporary evidence that everyday experiences of place influence children's health, wellbeing and learning. The study adopts an ecological approach to research that examines the contexts and detailed histories of children's activities in an outer-suburban schoolyard that is conceived, developed and maintained as an educational resource. By concentrating on a small number of children the research is able to discern sometimes-minute changes in children's everyday interactions with objects and gain privileged insights into the processes by which these are related to dispositional learning. The diversity of schoolyard resources and freedom to interact with and transform artefacts, places, and

practices, emerge as key factors influencing three levels of children's learning. First, interactions with schoolyard objects and spaces inform *what* children learn. Second, embedded case histories reveal that engaging with artefacts and practices mediates *how* learners participate in the social and physical milieu. Third, examples demonstrate that resolving contradictions between different elements expands children's understandings of *where* activities, which intersect with schoolyard hidden curricula, may reconfigure larger systems. Conclusions suggest that enriched and liberating schoolyard environments afford higher-level learning through processes of mediation and active reconstruction. In coming to this conclusion *Grounds for Learning* adds detail to current understandings of processes that enable children's schoolyard learning and suggests a means to reconceptualise school grounds as powerful resources serving 21st century educative purposes.