

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

“Through the Looking Glass to a Parallel Dimension”: An Ethnography of a Mixed-Age Woodland Building Site (April 2012-May 2013)

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Introduction

This ethnography is offered as a contribution to academic and popular debates about outdoor play and education—and the lack of it (e.g. Louv, 2005; Meire, 2007). It seeks to challenge the tendency in the literature to focus on child-centred settings and institutions, supervised by professional adults.

A kindergarten for children from age three to age seven has been running in a woodland site in Dorset for two years. The site is owned by a family-run estate. It has a pedestrian permissive path along the edge of it but no roads. There is minimal infrastructure on the site: a temporary round-house as shelter, very few toys and no screens. In April 2012, a building project began to replace a derelict game-keeper's hut with a round-wood timber shelter which the kindergarten and local community would use when the weather was too cold or rainy to be outside.

The project was led by an architect-builder and parent (DM), the kindergarten leader and the owner of the woodland. DM was helped in the hands-on building work by volunteers, mainly on family build weekends. Families were actively encouraged to get involved by advertising in local school newsletters, word-of-mouth, local press and national sustainability press.¹ The programme of works included thirteen family build weekends throughout the year involving 150 volunteers ranging between the ages of 0 and 80 from a wide range of social backgrounds. Children and teenagers participated, with their parents, in the building work (de-barking, chiselling joints, laying floors, shingling the roof, digging foundations, raising the frame etc) and support work (preparing and washing up lunch, serving tea, keeping the fire going, keeping an eye on younger children). The children also played around the edge of the building site and deeper in the woods.

The space created in and around the building site on these working weekends offered, what one parent called, a “parallel dimension” in the following ways: that children could participate in a real work project on a building site, that the space was neither child-centred (like a play-ground or a school) nor adult-centred (like an office or a restaurant or a university), that the space was neither public nor private but somewhere in-between, that the rules and hierarchy of the space were not pre-determined or fixed. My interest as an ethnographer was to observe how adults and children navigated and experienced this quasi-anarchic, outdoor space.

Conducting the ethnography

I conducted the research according to British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines. The parents, or other responsible adult, gave written permission for the children to be part of the research project.

My involvement in the project was not only as an ethnographer: I am also the wife of DM and mother of three of the participating children aged 9, 7 and 4 and had a role in shaping the project purposefully to involve families. I therefore had to balance practical and emotional responsibilities towards the project with the ethnographer's more detached role in relation to the observation of a setting. This insider position can bring a bias and a familiarity which obscures certain perspectives. However, there were also advantages to my position: the children, both my own and other people's, felt at ease with me and I was able to observe and hear the de-briefs and reflections after the weekends of some of the children and adults involved. The setting was also not my usual place of living, working or looking after children so I did not take its characteristics for granted.

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OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *Through the looking glass to a parallel dimension*

In analysis, I have sought to follow Geertz's (2003, p.5) account of ethnography as "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." I have drawn on photographs, field-notes, documents and literature from anthropology, sociology and radical education. I have generated the following categorisation of the different modes of interaction between children and adults which emerged in the woodland building site:

- adults teaching or looking after children
- adults and children working alongside each other or doing other activities together e.g. eating lunch, talking, going for a walk
- adults working with children playing or watching nearby
- children resisting or getting away from the building site

Below, I offer a description of each of these modes and an analysis of how they cast light on debates about children learning and playing outdoors.

Adults teaching or looking after children

This mode would be the norm in education or child-care settings in which the main purpose of the adults is to facilitate the child's learning. On this woodland building site, teaching and childcare were not the main purposes. However, the building work involved many activities which the children had never done before and which required some level of instruction. At the beginning of new activities, the children were told what to do and how to do it. Around the edges of the building site, there was also some need to look after the younger children when they needed help with an activity or comfort. This instruction, help or comfort was given either one to one or in very small groups. It also often involved some physical holding by the adult of the child—for example, an adult holding a child on his or her lap to read a story or DM holding a child's hand on a tool to demonstrate what to do (see Figure 1).

In this mode of relationship, with the child at the centre of the adult's attention, the children displayed a range of levels of



Figure 1

engagement from intent attention to passive disengagement. DM commented on feeling awkward in this formal teaching role when the initiative had come from him rather than the child. DM felt that when the child actively sought help, he or she was not in a passive role even while being taught and learnt the task more effectively. Perhaps the most striking part about this mode is that it is not the only or the dominant mode of relationship between adults and children in this site.

Adults and children working alongside each other

The children from a surprisingly young age (three plus) were able to make meaningful contributions to the work. They moved from the role of being taught or being looked after to being fellow volunteers alongside other adult volunteers (Figure 2). They were still learning from the more experienced adults around them, but rather than being formally instructed, they were learning by doing, watching, listening, asking questions. The possibility of this kind of interaction meant that the children had the chance to learn from adults who were not comfortable in the role of formal "teacher" but certainly had skills, knowledge and attitudes to share with the children. Some of these adults commented with surprise on how much they had enjoyed working with the children in this way. This kind of interaction was also helpful for children who tended to struggle with more institutional settings and formal instruction. For example, a boy (aged 10) with Asperger's syndrome, was able to contribute by tending the fire most of the day but also learn new skills by working alongside a quiet but experienced adult making floor-joists.



Figure 2

At meal-times, adults and children ate together in a circle. The conversation was dominated by adults—sometimes including a formal presentation by the project leaders or a round of introductions, which the children were encouraged to join in, but not compelled. It is hard to know what the children made of these conversations—a boy (aged 9) and a girl (aged 7) quoted back at me, unprompted, a phrase I had used in a speech about people telling us "not to rock the boat." One parent observed that over the course of the day both adults and children had learnt to

be alongside each other: for example at lunch, the children had been served first by the adults and by dinner-time children and adults served themselves in a more integrated way. This reflects a surprisingly quick adaptation by adults and children from behaviours appropriate to a child-centred kindergarten to those of a mixed-age community.

In this mode of being alongside each other, the adults mainly remained in authority. The rhythm and rules of the building site were set by the adults—for example, when to have lunch, which tasks to do in which order. In this way, the woodland building site could be experienced as more authoritarian than a child-centred environment in which adults follow the lead of children in order to facilitate their learning or play. For example, on the day when the four heavy timber frames were raised, all the children were needed to pull on the ropes, literally and metaphorically (Figure 3); on this day, complete silence was required while the ropes



Figure 3

were pulled up (a three-year old boy asked “When can we be noisy?”) and the children’s time was controlled quite strictly in terms of when they could play and when they must help.

However, this authority was often accepted with a good grace by the children perhaps because, as the anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1928, p. 181), described in her account of children growing up in Samoa, the children understood the “necessary nature of tasks” or as one parent in the woods, described it, the “seriousness” of the work. The urgency and potential dangers of the work also allowed adults to be quite firm in setting boundaries; one parent commented that unlike other social and cultural contexts, he felt he “could tell other people’s children off.”

This adult leadership of the work project did not appear to undermine the children’s sense of shared ownership and pride in the project. A parent remarked that the children stuck with it even when they were bored because they “knew it was their job.” A girl (aged 9) whispered to her father speaking on the phone to her mother: “Tell Mum we raised four frames.”

The hierarchy between adults and children was not fixed. In some activities, for example debarking the timber, children became the experts and would take the lead in showing other children and adult volunteers how to do the task safely and well. The children also observed adult volunteers learning new skills which unsettled the conventional notion of adult teacher and child learner in a tangible way.

Adults working with children playing or watching alongside

Nearly all the children divided their time between work, play and watching. The ongoing beat of the adult work and the resulting lack of focus on the children seems to have provided a context in which younger children felt safe and happy to play close by and from which older children could branch out. The children’s play ranged both in terms of its physical distance from the building site and the relationship of its content to the building work. Sometimes the children played *on* the building site, for example, sliding down a pile of materials covered in a tarpaulin, balancing on planks, chasing in the building sand (Figure 4). Sometimes, they played further a-field,



Figure 4

although still within shouting distance; for example, swinging, climbing, ball games, drawing, making up fantasy games on their own or in small groups (Figure 5). Sometimes they played games which were very close in content to adult work going on, for example, digging, wheel-barrowing, building camps, building bike ramps



Figure 5

My observations would support the sociological view that “young children commonly draw on ideas and experiences from the adult world in play, in unique and surprising ways” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 1).

The children also spent time watching the adults working. There is a fallen down tree near the building site and, particularly the younger children, liked to sit there and watch the work going on. Through this visible building process the children could, as the American de-schooler John Holt argued for, “get some sense of the processes by which good work is done” (1989, p. 130).

This opportunity for children to watch adults is in stark contrast to the situation in most nurseries or schools in which the adults are encouraged to observe the children closely in order to inform pedagogical interventions. This inversion of the usual ways of watching reflects a different conception of the adult role in relation to children. Sociological literature on children's outdoor play often argues for the role of the adult in “scaffolding” the children's learning, encouraging “sustained shared thinking” as a way to promote “cognitive development” (Garrick, 2009, p. 30). In the woodland building site, the adults and children did not see their roles in this way. On the site the adults kept an eye on the children and were willing to involve them in the work, but were mainly focused on their own activities. The children were, therefore, left to their

own devices in their play which was mostly happy, inventive, absorbed and independent. Paradoxically, the children seem to have experienced much higher levels of freedom and self-determination than in an environment set up for the purpose of play or education.

In analysis, it was often difficult to decide whether to categorise the children's activity as “work” or “play” or “watching.” They often displayed the same levels of intense concentration and enjoyment in each mode. Sometimes they would seamlessly “turn the work into a game” (DM). For example, when the footings were

being dug, the younger children started off helping the adults with the digging, but then started digging for their own entertainment (Figure 6). Even when they didn't help very much, they were busy having fun and their parents were able to get on with the essential digging. Or the children would be helping with a task but then stop to watch another event or activity. This spontaneous blurring of work, play and observation would add support to Mead's conclusion that “our children [are forced] to make a false set of categories: work, play and school” (1928, p. 4). It was often difficult to categorise the adult roles in relation to the children which offers a useful challenge to an assumption which I have observed amongst my own peer-group of parents that, whenever an adult is with a child, he or she is “doing child care.”



Figure 6

Children resisting or getting away from the building site

The children manifested resistance to the project in a number of ways. It is often hard to observe resistance since, by definition it is out of range of the adult site or in someone's head or in a moment of argument. Sometimes the children would be physically involved but actually in a different imaginary world: for example, an eight year old boy whistling to himself dreamily while holding a pile of shingles on the

roof or sitting in the circle at lunch-time but slightly turned away or looking bored. This kind of resistance was unproblematic within this context since the purpose of being there was about the building project; day-dreaming was compatible with helping. The children sometimes also resisted more actively by refusing to help with tasks or helping in a sulky way. This kind of resistance was a cause of tension—particularly between parent and child. The children were less prone to this kind of resistance when the purpose of the task was very clear, for example, the raising of the frames, and when the instruction did not come from the child's own parent.

The children's play can also be understood as a kind of subversion or as a sociologist has described it, “a wresting control from the adults” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 1). The younger children would seek out private places to play close to the building site from which they could survey the world. The older children would sometimes colonise the back of a builder's van or car as a private place to play and talk. Sometimes, they absented themselves from the building site area altogether and played deeper in the woods. Both older and younger children clearly enjoyed pursuing their own projects and plans. In some ways, this kind of play did not resist but rather reinforced the wider values of the building site since their play often reflected the building site work, gave them the chance to practise the skills they were learning, for example, building their own camps and allowed them to take the initiative in a way which would have been difficult on the main building site. Occasionally, the older children would go off to people's houses in the village and play computer games or watch TV. This kind of activity was perhaps a more significant act of resistance to the outdoors activities being endorsed by the adults in the woods. A nine-year old boy expressed disappointment that he had missed an important moment in the build project because he had been playing indoors with a friend in the village. This anecdote suggests some of the tensions in creating a “parallel dimension” close to main-stream realities.

Conclusions

The woodland building site offered a space which profoundly challenged many of these so-called “realities” and deeply held assumptions about the necessity and value of child-centred institutions, pedagogy, curriculum and behaviour management. The children's contribution to the building work, their unsupervised play, the natural order and rich learning of it all offer support to Holt (1989, pp. 160-161) and other de-schoolers' conclusions that: “teaching does not make learning”; that children are “extremely good at learning”; that “we can best help children learn by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them.” If this has any truth to it, then we urgently need not more institutions *for children* under the supervision and instruction of education professionals. Instead we need more “parallel dimensions” in which *adults and children* can learn lessons alongside each other—as a parent suggested about this woodland building site—in “how to live.”

Notes

¹For example, article in Permaculture magazine, available at <http://www.permaculture.co.uk/news/1104121611/volunteers-young-old-needed-roundwood-shelter-build>

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The title quotation which inspired this paper was given to me via email on 19th May 2013 by a parent volunteer at the woodland building.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *Through the looking glass to a parallel dimension*

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