

Stories from Practice

Learning Through Landscapes: The Importance of School Grounds

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‘school grounds can seriously damage your health’

This paper formed the basis of a keynote address illustrated with a slide presentation of more than a hundred images of young people outdoors at school the contents of which cannot easily be ‘transcribed’. The sections dealing with the formal, informal and hidden curricula—the rationale for this work—relied heavily on the slides. These are, therefore, artificially short in this written version but supported to some extent by the photographs accompanying this paper.

When torturers wish to disorientate their victims, they frequently create a featureless environment in which to place them.

This school is very, very interesting and we’re very happy here

These two contrasting quotations refer to the same environment—school grounds. The first is taken from a provocative article I wrote along the lines of “school grounds can seriously damage your health” (Lucas 1993). The second provokes in a different way. It is the voice of a very happy child at a school with grounds which have been developed into an exotic wonderland of greenery and activity.

In the United Kingdom there are 30 000 school grounds covering about 150 000 acres (60 000 ha) of land. While too many still resemble a prison yard this is changing. Over the last decade there has been a quiet revolution taking place in thousands of British schools as a result of the work of Learning through Landscapes, an organisation which publicises, researches, advises, trains and lobbies hard for

school grounds on a national and international stage. Many schools are not unlike the negative British stereotype with which I began—largely asphalt, treeless, featureless, without much seating or shelter and virtually devoid of wildlife or aesthetic stimulation.

In this paper I intend to share with you some of the good practice in school grounds from the Northern Hemisphere. I hope to also stimulate you into wanting to establish new initiatives with us in the UK.

I shall start by providing you with some observations about school grounds which seem not to be widely known. Then let me touch on some initiatives in Sweden, Canada, the USA, and Japan and end by exploring work in the United Kingdom. This work has led Learning through Landscapes to develop the rationale for using and developing school grounds currently being put into practice by thousands of schools in Britain. We have already been able to convince the United Kingdom government of the extraordinary benefits of developing school grounds. The benefits were established as a result of research conducted by Learning through Landscapes since 1985, analysing the opinions of head teachers, teachers, parents and young people in those schools. Most recently we have been studying secondary schools in a program of qualitative research. Finally I shall tell you something of Learning through Landscapes and extend an invitation to you to join with us internationally in promoting the importance of school grounds.

School grounds—some interesting facts



The extraordinary benefits of developing school grounds

‘school grounds are the only outdoor environments to which some children have regular access’

- school grounds are the one external environment to which all children have regular access.
- for most children school grounds are the first public outdoor space of which they have any sustained experience.

- school grounds are the only outdoor environments to which some children have regular access.
- whether or not school grounds are used for teaching, children may spend a quarter of their time at school in them.
- a great proportion of school curricula can only be effectively taught outdoors.
- the way school grounds are designed and managed has considerable influence on children's behaviour and attitude.

Many of these statements might trip readily from the tongue, might come dangerously close to being truisms. That doesn't mean, however, that the statements—or the implications which flow from them—are of little worth. I believe that the case is quite contrary to that. And an even more compelling case for the importance of school grounds will be made in the Learning through Landscapes' rationale set out below. Before I do this, however, let me offer you an international context to this area of work.

International context

‘thousands of schools and other organisations took part’

In the last five years there has been an explosion of interest in several countries in the nature and use of their school grounds. Sweden has set up an organisation, Skolans Uterum, supported by the Swedish government to help schools and to hold conferences to raise people's awareness of the importance of school grounds. In Canada, the Evergreen Foundation has taken a strategic approach to the opportunities of naturalising the school estate across Canada. It is establishing a network of key support staff and promoting imaginative projects. Japan is attempting to introduce more teaching outdoors and has translated into Japanese the Learning through Landscapes' *Bright Ideas: The Outdoor Classroom* (Keaney & Lucas 1992). In the USA there is a serious exploration of children's participation and the role of horticulture in school grounds planning, development and use. A growing number of organisations including Botanical Gardens, the Montessori Foundation and the American Horticultural Society are interested in turning school grounds into gardens. Closer to England, Learning through Landscapes has set up in Scotland, with Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environmental Education Council, a sister initiative called Grounds for Learning. Further information about international school grounds projects can be obtained from the Learning through Landscapes office, the address of which is at the end of this paper. This is, of course, a very limited summary of a few initiatives and does not include work currently being undertaken in Australia, including the 'Learnscaping' project described elsewhere in this issue.

Perhaps the most powerful indication of global interest in school grounds has been the response to Learning through Landscapes' initiative in the creation of International School Grounds Day. Last year thousands of schools and other organisations took part. Details of what took place in 1997 on 2 May are available from our office; in 1998 International School Grounds day will be held on 1 May.

The Learning through Landscapes rationale

The rationale we have developed takes account of three 'kinds' of curricula, suggesting that schools can make educational use their grounds to advance student learning within:

- formal curricula—in using school grounds as an outdoor classroom.
- informal curricula—by paying attention to the experiences which are offered during lunchtimes and other study breaks.
- hidden curricula—by taking heed to the messages and their meanings which children read from the ways in which their school's grounds are used, designed and managed.

In addition, there are extra-curricular and community opportunities which most schools will want to consider.

Formal curricula



Promoting skills such as observation...classification...

‘school grounds can make a unique contribution to students' development of their understanding of the natural world’

An obvious use of the school grounds is to extend the teaching area beyond the confines of the classroom into the rich resource for learning right on a school's doorstep. There are many possibilities for learning in every discipline-based learning areas as well as in cross-curricular issues related to environmental education and health. Within all of these there are many opportunities for promoting students' learning skills including observation,

cooperation, design and problem-solving, mapping and recording. A wide range of materials, many of them produced by Learning through Landscapes and listed at the end of this paper, are available to support school communities in effective use of their grounds.

A wide variety of learning opportunities are presented on developed sites: a pond may provide a resource for teaching about life processes and living things in science while at the same time providing a context for using and applying mathematics and other creative pursuits.

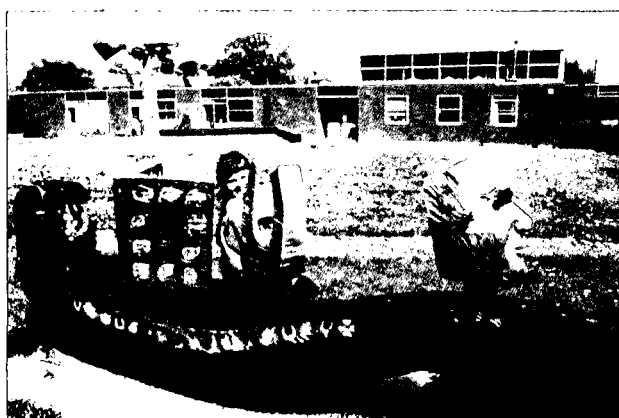
School grounds gives access to what have been termed the 'natural curricula' which provide first-hand experience of natural habitats, changing weather conditions, the rotation of the seasons and the processes of growth and decay. Indeed, the grounds can make a unique contribution to students' development of their understanding of the natural world and of the principles of biodiversity and sustainable development.

Existing good practice in many schools and guidance provided by the United Kingdom's School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, especially *Teaching Environmental Matters Through the National Curriculum* (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority 1996), supports this view. Learning through Landscapes was involved as consultant in producing this document which is, not surprisingly, full of case studies of work in schools grounds!

Informal curricula

'school grounds need to contain a diversity of places and habitats'

At least a quarter of children's school day is taken up with lunchtime and other breaks, the times of day when children are in school and not involved in lessons but in play and recreation. Much of this time, weather permitting, is spent outside. During this informal part of the school day much important learning takes place.



Play involves students in learning about self

Play is a complex subject and its significance is not always understood. It is sometimes confused with amusement, diversion or simply 'letting off steam'. But it involves students in learning about self, about other people and about their environments. Essential to healthy human development, play involves processes of exploring and of discovering, of taking goal oriented action, and of coming to terms with a mixture of successful and sometimes unsuccessful attempts to achieve those goals.

What students can do at these times is largely determined by the design and management of the school grounds. School grounds need to contain a diversity of places and habitats providing maximum opportunities for young people to interact with each other and those places.

It is important for schools to understand issues connected with the use of space—the degree to which football dominates some playgrounds is one obvious issue—and the ways in which it can be most effectively managed.

It is not only at primary school level that play is important; older pupils' need for opportunities for informal recreation also need to be addressed.

Hidden curricula

'school grounds....convey messages and meanings about the ethos of schools'

The hidden curricula of school grounds is a concept which was introduced by Learning through Landscapes in 1989 and developed in the publication *Special Places: Special People* (Titman 1994) which contained the outcomes of a two-year research study of the semiotics, or message-carrying, of school grounds. The research suggested that messages conveyed by the nature of a school's grounds are very important because they are essentially 'signposts' of its ethos. Whether or not school grounds are well used, their very existence affects and influences pupils, staff, parents and the wider community.

The main findings of this research will help schools to understand the complexity of the issues surrounding the use and development of school grounds. They were:

- school grounds, as external environments, have become increasingly important to children in modern society
- school grounds, by their design and the way they are managed, convey messages and meanings about the ethos of schools to children which influence their attitudes and behaviours.
- children read messages from the structures and processes permitted or valued in school grounds. These frame the cultural context in school environments and constitute powerful hidden curricula.

- in a range of subtle but significant ways hidden curricula have considerable influence on the operation of all schools.
- it is within the power of those who manage schools to determine the nature of the hidden curricula of their grounds.

New features, new design or new management solutions in school grounds development are of immense benefit. It is the process of development, however, which causes the most wide ranging changes.

The effects of school grounds development

It is not so much what is done as how it is done which matters. Developing school grounds is an ongoing process. This process needs to be:

- holistic—involving the whole site, the whole community and all aspects of curricula.
- sustainable—involving consideration of the use, design, management and maintenance of school grounds as part of a school's development planning.
- participative—involving students in working with adults in as many aspects as possible.

Where developments are undertaken according to Learning through Landscapes' suggested processes, and these three key principles, schools report a number of benefits. Our ongoing research, published in *School grounds: a guide to good practice* (Lucas 1997) suggests that these include:

- improved relationships between pupils and staff.
- improved relationships of parents with schools.
- an enhanced image and greater popularity of schools with their local community.
- a reduction in the incidents of bullying, accidents and vandalism.
- more effective learning and teaching.
- development of an ethos of care and a stronger sense of ownership.
- more efficient use of existing resources.
- a great deal of fun!

Earth links

School grounds are critically important environments for young people; for them and the adults working with them school grounds can contribute to powerful experiences in an education towards our links with the Earth, the theme of this conference. We adults enjoy an obligation to share with our students developmental opportunities of the kinds suggested by this paper; those of us who have done so find the obligation becomes a privilege. 🌱



Links with the earth—powerful experiences

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Learning through Landscapes' publications include many more than those listed above. Details can be obtained from the Australian Association for Environmental Education, or from Bill Lucas at:

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