

Outdoor Learning... In The Playground

Using your school grounds innovatively can add new dimensions to curriculum learning as well as empowering children to plan and design their environment.

Does the notion of Outdoor Learning immediately conjure up for you Forest Schools? Minibeast safaris? or food growing? All these activities are very worthwhile of course, but this article looks at another aspect of learning outside the classroom.

The school grounds are a huge and often underused learning resource and 'classroom' space, where there is open air and opportunity for practical activities, louder, bigger, wetter and messier learning. This is generally accompanied by fun and laughter too. So, my working life as a landscape architect has revolved around helping children and teachers to make the best use of this space, for everyday core curriculum delivery and enrichment. I also believe that engagement in the process of change, during implementing school ground developments large or small, is a valuable learning opportunity. This article explores this in more detail.

Learning through design and build

Landscape architects and teachers could make a lot more of the possibilities of engaging children in the process of design and build, whether on the scale of a major development, a small extension project that impacts the grounds, or modest playground modifications. Budgets are always tight, and funding children's

engagement might be considered a luxury, however, the learning benefits can add weight to the argument to allocate a percentage of the capital budget for specialist support to do this. Some schools use their pupil premium funding to support this enriching learning opportunity. Many schools have valued the opportunity to engage children meaningfully in their grounds projects and feel it is important to do so. Even small projects benefit from the overview and experience of a landscape architect who really understands schools and can work effectively with children and staff. We can ask the right questions, to be sure that budgets are spent carefully and that real needs are met, to enhance outdoor learning and play from early years to secondary. Remember that this is not always the same as perceived needs! Skillful observation of the grounds in use, together with insights from the children themselves is the starting point.

Engagement in the process of change

Keeping the learner at the heart of design is key, and children are often consulted, but are they engaged? Adults who are pressured by time frames and other imperatives take the decisions. I would argue that children should also have the opportunity to begin to understand the process of change, and the complexity of these decisions. How better to do this, than to have them involved in school grounds development projects. Depending on scale, this can either be shadowing a larger scheme and developing a part of it, or for smaller tasks undertaking the whole project themselves, with support.

Children are often asked what they 'want' when planning playground changes, but they need experiences and reference points to answer this question effectively. Instead, we may take children and staff on research visits (for larger scale projects) and on-site problem identification 'audits' to make sure that the right questions are asked. Children are the best guides for tours of their grounds and always give us excellent insight into issues that need resolution and, just as importantly, what works really well already and why! (so you don't change something inadvertently that supports creative play or important learning opportunities!)



Feeling pride in achievement

The Building Schools for the Future program and Primary Capital Program in the 2000s used laudable involvement programs for children, but there was lack of clarity about how the outcomes and opinions expressed by the children actually informed or influenced the resulting design outcomes. There was very little to show the children whether their work made any difference. Did this turn out to be tokenistic? I believe in many cases it was. This article advocates a different approach, scalable to any sized project. Also, when the inevitable value engineering takes place, the children should

Colwall Primary School - Case study

This was a low budget project to support positive behaviour at breaktimes. Children and staff looked at playtime activities to identify the issues and missing experiences (upper body activity and imaginative play) Yr6 children then made scaled models of ideas for fixed and modular resources which formed the brief for contractors. Two small and carefully chosen items of fixed equipment were installed, but the most effective resources were an abundance of logs, planks, decks, tubes, cargo nets etc that offered open ended possibilities. This was a very low cost solution. Children were also involved in carving some details into some of the logs, to provoke further sparks of imagination. Staff training and risk/benefit assessment was carried out, with children.

Key Questions

At the inception of a project, large or small, ask yourself these questions; What is the bigger picture? Where are we now and where do we need to get to? Have we identified the key issues in a clear brief? Where are the real opportunities for engagement of children? What are the tangible aspects that the children can influence or take part in constructing? How can we facilitate this in the program of works? What Risk-Benefit assessments are required to make this happen?

Barons Court primary School - Case Study

This is an example of how design modeling and problem solving workshops successfully engaged children in design and grounds development.

The grounds had been affected by building works and needed re-imagining. Children and staff were inspired by visits, research and ideas from a number of sources to open their eyes to possibilities. We focused on what staff and children wanted to DO in their grounds and experiences required as part of the learning resources.

This helped children as well as staff to make realistic assessments and choices. Following the agreement of the brief, a highlight of the project was design modeling during one of the schools regular beach days. Using the sand and found objects the children made 3D models to explore some of the design issues in the grounds.

This was followed up by real scale design workshops in the grounds where, for example, maths came alive whilst planning the challenge trail in detail. All children in the school were then involved in the construction during the week the contractors were on-site. They developed skills, working safely and cooperatively, used drills and saws and other tools and realised how physical the job of bark peeling is! Measuring, leveling, hole digging...all were tasks the children worked on, demonstrating great perseverance. At the end of each day they were heard telling their parents, with great pride, all about particular element of the structures they worked on.

Is the hole deep enough yet for the post?



This is harder work than I thought...



I built this!



Yr6 modelling to scale- Ideas for modular resources to stimulate imaginative play.



Can we fit a monkey line into this space?



Evaluation of the project by the Head included this comment. "Before, I would have just gone to a catalogue.... but now I know that children can be involved, learn, express themselves and get a great sense of achievement'. An a quote from the children's perspective; "It's going to be here forever and I MADE IT!"

(The full story can be read on my website, from a link in the case studies section to an article "Model for Success" at the end of the "Design to Reality" case study <http://landscapesnaturally.co.uk/case-studies/case-study6.html>)

be involved in these decision too, in an age appropriate way. If not, Heads can expect protest letters asking for explanations! A group of Yr10 students did just this after their Quad designs had been 'simplified' by staff not involved in the project, who did not consider other options for cost reductions that would still have met the brief and, most significantly, without any reference back to the students or staff who were involved in the design. However, when they are involved, and even if plans change, children report feeling a great sense of pride in their achievements when they can see how their work made a difference.

Application of Skills

Look for opportunities for real tasks, not just site visits with hard hats during the build or planting bulbs at the end of a project. These are valid activities, but alone do not take advantage of the opportunities for curriculum delivery. Throughout the process children can carry out suitable tasks such as site survey assessments, log and analyse microclimate data, help with the geophysics surveys (it's very challenging to walk at the correct meters per second pace for the ground penetrating radar!) measure and plot the outline of a new building/structure, design and carve details into structural timbers, design the planting, propagate and plant...and many more tasks (see text box), using a balance of self-directed and guided activities whilst working through the design framework. Mirroring the process using different curriculum skills leads to a greater understanding of the process of change that they will come across regularly in their school career.

For learning to be exciting and motivating, these tasks need to be relevant, suitably challenging and leading to tangible results. The staff also need to be willing to change the ways they teach and have the confidence to do so. Where this happens children are engaged, adaptive, collaborative and find that they can connect ideas and develop solutions. These are all skills for a future world of work that does not yet exist.

This is more than pupils giving their opinions, which is just one important element of engagement. This is about learning through the process of change, with very practical problems and solutions leading to tangible physical changes. There is always a debate about legitimacy and authenticity, but in my opinion this approach puts children at the heart of the process as well as the design solution.

Do you have any plans to develop school grounds, large or small?

Get in touch with Felicity Robinson CMLI to discuss your project and see if we can help. www.landscapesnaturally.co.uk

Some ideas for children's engagement. (age appropriate and according to the scale of a project)

- Help to identify the problem, the brief and key performance indicators (KPIs) against which to assess any plans.
- Carry out surveys, microclimate, biodiversity, etc.
- Discuss options/site visits and plan solutions.
- Work together to develop/model ideas.
- Critique designs produced by professionals or suppliers – challenge them with the KPIs.
- Assess revision to project designs.
- Look at budget costs and value engineering, to consider options and understand changes.
- Interview or brief contractors.
- Make reasoned recommendations.
- Take an active and practical role in appropriate elements of construction, with suitable risk/benefit assessment .(including sawing, drilling, digging, bark stripping, measuring, leveling, carving,)
- Design planting, propagate and plant.
- Create site signage for professional production.
- Create plant ID resources and interactive habitat maps for future use.
- And many more....