

# When space becomes place: developing “an indestructible sense of wonder”



Kindergarten institute  
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# Share our research

- Highlights the importance of play outside and play with nearby nature
- Early childhood programs

As researchers--

- What engaged the children outside?
- What motivated the educators?

Ongoing investigation

# As researchers

We brought...

- Our identities as mothers
- Our concerns for the environment
- Natasha's focus on children's rights
- My focus on early childhood
- A belief that natural outside spaces provide unique opportunities for children

“If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”

Rachel Carson



# What are your early memories of play outside?

- Think back to your early childhood
- Remember the smells, tastes, feelings of being outside



# My sense of place









# Place is....

Space that

- has historical meanings
- provides continuity and identity over generations
- in which important words have been spoken
- vows have been exchanged, promises have been made and demands have been issued

# Place is....

“a protest against an unpromising pursuit of space. It is the declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom....a yearning for a place is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage.”

Walter Brueggemann (1977) *The Land*

# Memories of place

- Wind, air, earth, water....
- To anchor us
- To inspire us
- Place is where we learned about our bodies, our minds, about others and about risk





# What did you learn in your place?

- In your play outside what did you learn?
- Think about your games, your solitary play, your physical play
- What skills did you gain?
- What phenomenon did you observe?
- What made you curious?

# A gift to children

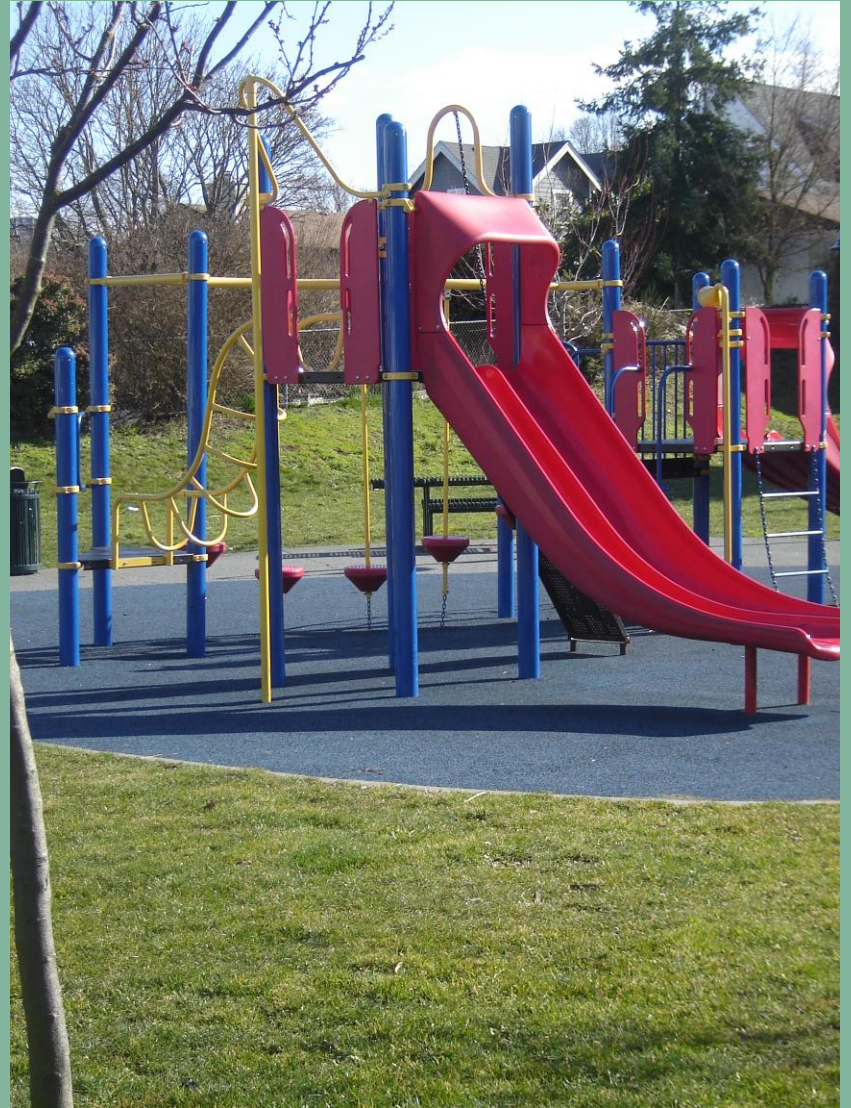
- A rich bank of experiences for their bodies, minds, spirits
- Relationships with living materials that engage with them and possibly challenge them
- Memories that sustain them and give them hope and joy
- Support their developing identity as a learner

# E. O. Wilson's Biophilia



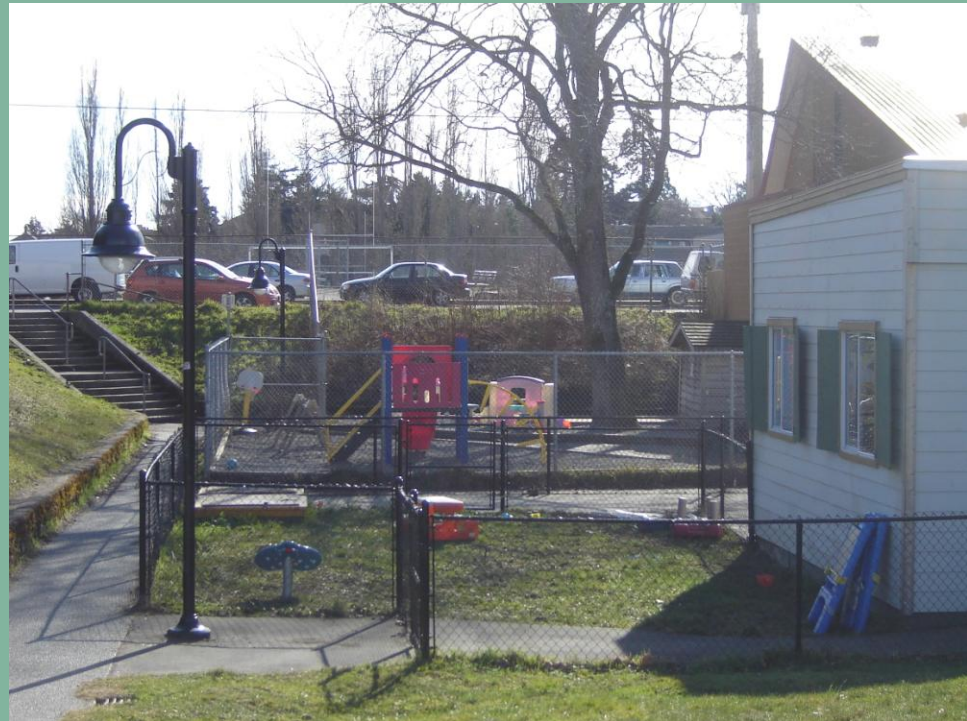
# Playgrounds

- Space or place??
- Universal?
- Reflective of the local?
- What skills do you see promoted?





What values are reflected in these outdoor spaces/places?



# One could say....

- Fenced-in
- Bouncy, impervious ground
- Bright primary colors
- Regularized (normalized?) movement
- Risk-controlled/regulated
- Hard, unresponsive materials
- Flattened landscape



“The landscapes we create are powerful testament to how we as a culture treat the natural world. If we asphalt the entire play yard, surround it with chain link fence and fill it up with plastic toys and organized sports what does that tell children?”

Herrington 2005







# Nature/outdoors offers us...



# Nature provides

- Health/fitness--wellness
- Sense of belonging
- Connections and meaning
- Endless opportunities and possibilities
- Open-ended materials/raw materials
- Relationships with others, with materials, with place



“making a world to find a place to  
discover a self” edith cobb





Children learn about their place early  
and in ways different from us...





# Children engage outside through play/exploration



# Through play....

Children will....

- Explore their environment through movement, through their senses, through observation
- Engage with living materials—nearby nature
- Add to their developing identities as learners

# What distinguishes outdoor play?

- Wide range of movement and noise, not always possible inside
- Unpredictable and variable
- Experience of transformation
- Rich sensory possibilities
- Rich context of materials
- Connection to natural local world
- Challenges and risks

# Why do this research?

- Many children in early childhood programs
- Health/fitness
- Articulate the learning
- Connect children to their setting/their place
- Provide children with opportunities to “fall in love”
- Articulate the issues and rationales facing early childhood programs

# Four early childhood programs

- Expressed an interest in exploring what could be done in their outside settings
- Came to a discussion group
- Agreed to participate in our research
- Our process was organic



# Each centre had a vision

- Infant/toddler centre
- First Nations early childhood centre
- 3-4 year old centre—part of a larger centre
- Preschool/child care school-based program

# The infant/toddler centre













# First Nations Child Care program

















# 3-4 year olds child care centre













Joined by another program....









# Methodology

- We observed and videotaped
- We asked the children and listened
- We asked the educators and listened
- We observed and videotaped
- We asked the children again! And heard more.
- We asked the educators again! And heard more.
- Shared our findings and discussed with educators and licensing officers.

# Listening to the children...

- We tried to understand the children's point of view
- The children had clear ideas—they had lots to say
- Experts in their own lives
- Make their own meaning of a place and its possibilities

# Listening

“listening to the hundred, the thousand languages, symbols and codes we use to express ourselves and communicate...

Listening as welcoming... Listening is emotion... Listening is not easy. It requires deep awareness...”

Carlina Rinaldi



# What did we learn from the children?

- Biophilia affirmed
- Children had a sense of place—they had favorite spots
- Loved to run, take risks, jump, hide, climb
- Loved to talk about being outside
- Understood cycles of nature
- Outside was associated with different imaginative games

# In our observations we noticed that children...

- Had different relationships with adults and each other outside
- Were calmer (less conflict)
- More energetic (engaged) and larger, noisier movement
- A “flow state”, energized and relaxed
- Had rich learning opportunities
- Shared with their parents the joys and possibilities outdoors



# We heard from the educators....

- Felt their relationships with children were different outside/more relaxed
- Commented on the spiritual dimensions of being outdoors
- Felt their early childhood education courses did not cover play outdoors/the learning possibilities
- Facilitated experiential learning in the outdoors
- Opportunity to become a co-learner

# Would you add anything??

- From your experience
- Do you agree?
- What do you notice about being outside with children?
- How is being outside for you?



We also heard...



# Outside educators experienced tensions

- Balancing licensing requirements with providing rich satisfying experiences for children--safety
- Negotiating different perceptions and levels of anxiety/fear (educators, parents, licensing, society)
- Safety and designing outdoor space

# How did they manage the tensions?

- “Secrets”
- For the First Nations program it was an issue of cultural safety for themselves—they did not feel ‘safe’



# Licensing was part of the final discussion

- Negotiations with licensing
- On-going dialogue
- Educators learning to articulate the importance of certain types of play for children and voice their case with licensing

# Changes are happening...



Children will always find their ways to  
claim ownership of their place





# First Nations ECE program making cultural connections to place































Children  
found uses  
for the  
poles and  
for the  
space...the  
climber  
was gone!



# Fourth centre continues to utilize the hillside...



# Role of the adult

- **KEY!!!**
- Negotiate between beliefs/knowledge about children and issues of safety
- Beliefs about nature and the outside world shared
- Co-investigator



## Rachel Carson said...

“If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in...”

# Critical pedagogy of place

- David Sobel's idea of "pedagogy of place"
- Gruenewald adds a critical piece to place-based education
- Listen to what a place means to children
- Find the local instead of a generalized notion of nature or wilderness or children
- What does it mean to be in this place and from this place?



# Wholistic approach

- Focus on academic skills—kindergarten readiness
- Emphasis on content knowledge
- Children outside re-focus us on seeing and appreciating children's growth as integrated and interconnected

# OECD report

- Evaluation of our early childhood system
- We show up poorly on many scales in our attention to early childhood
- Spend more time indoors than other countries with cold weather (2.5 times more time)



# Changing your outside area...

Map your outside area...

- Include favorite places/well-used areas/unused areas on your map
- Ask the children about their favorite areas outside and what they like in those places
- Observe the children and make notes on your map
- Observe yourself and find out what attracts you
- Note ground levels, dips and hollows, secret places, invisible areas

# Reflect

- What were elements we noted as part of our memories
- How to include?
- What textures could be added? Wildlife planted for? Senses planted for?
- Sounds?
- Change in levels and opportunities for climbing, rolling, running, jumping....



# Use your own memories....

- A secret space?
- Physical?
- Sensory?
- Your own learning?
- How to re-create elements of your memories?

# Include raw materials/loose parts

- Provide spaces for sand, mud and water
- Loose parts allow children to control their space and create multiple play scenarios



# Theory of loose parts

- Mud, sand and water
- Loose parts-- children can manipulate themselves

























# Consider....

- Hollows or hills?
- Local logs, rocks or stumps
- Take the inside out and the outside in
- Sharing your stories and understandings with the children
- Grasses, bushes, rocks—creating secret places
- Edible landscapes

# Places for identities

- Explorer
- Researcher
- Artist
- Risk taker
- Sensualist
- Athlete
- Thinker



# Places for...

- Swinging/bouncing/balancing
- Rolling/sliding
- Jumping/leaping/climbing
- Running/carrying/lugging
- Throwing/kicking
- Meandering/floating/daydreaming
- Retreating/pondering

# What more information do you need?

- Create a network/discussion group
  - Other programs
  - Nurseries
  - Park naturalists
- Use the internet
- Build on your passions and strengths



# A Canadian Forest Preschool: an inspiration













# To be continued....

- A larger community discussion group is emerging from this project
- Creating a Canadian network of educators, researchers and academics
- Child and Nature Alliance is looking into hosting a section of their website for early childhood discussions, collaborations and sharing of information [www.childnature.ca/](http://www.childnature.ca/)

Uniqueness  
of the local





“Action follows thought. We can choose to change. We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums.”

Anita Olds

