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Use of School Grounds for Learning

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SCHOOL GROUNDS

A PEB conference on the use of school grounds for learning – “Grounds for celebration” – in association with Learning Through Landscapes and the UK Department for Education and Employment (DFEE), was held in Winchester, UK, September 1997.

(Editor's note: This is an edited version of the background paper prepared for the seminar, with some of the key findings included)

WHY SCHOOL GROUNDS?

This is the first time that the topic of school grounds has been selected for an OECD seminar in the Programme on Educational Building (PEB). Indeed, it is probably the first time that an international event has been wholly devoted to this important area.

Recently, notably at the Bologna seminar in May 1997 (see also PEB Exchange 32), the OECD drew attention to the risks faced by schools from outside elements. In France and other OECD countries this has resulted, in some cases, in the erection of protective security fencing around and, sometimes, within school sites. At a stroke the school is

separated from the outside world which is perceived to be a risk to the vulnerable young people within its care.

In some countries, most notably England, Scotland, Canada and Sweden, concerns about an increasingly unsafe society have produced very different responses. Schools see community education as part of the solution rather than the problem. They conclude that, if it is increasingly difficult for young people to roam outside in the places where they live, then it is essential that they redress this fact.

The environment provided by the school, in particular its grounds, becomes a very precious space. In it pupils can experience the wonders of the natural world; they can explore aspects of science, geography and environmental education which need to be learned outside; they can play creatively and enjoy, with the local community, the opportunity at first hand of developing their grounds. In this scenario school grounds become protected places, cherished by the very communities which others seek to exclude.

There are, however, even more fundamental issues at stake. It has been said that you can tell much about a civilisation from the state of its prisons. The same is also true of school grounds. Indeed, many share characteristics with the prison yard, damaging those doing time in them, albeit in less obvious ways.

That there is a direct effect between the way school grounds are designed and managed and the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils who use them has been comprehensively described in *Special Places; Special People*, by Wendy Titman¹. Prior to this study,

1. *Special Places; Special People*, Wendy Titman ed., Worldwide Fund for Nature/Learning Through Landscapes, 1994.

there had been remarkably little research about children and school grounds and almost none which involved children in the research process. It follows that the science of understanding the relationship between school grounds and their users is a comparatively recent one.



THE LEARNING THROUGH LANDSCAPES TRUST

In the United Kingdom, a comprehensive attempt has been made to promote all aspects of the use, design, management and maintenance of school grounds. After a three-year research project, an

independent organisation, Learning Through Landscapes (LTL), was launched in the early 1990's. Significantly, the research was supported by the UK government, through the Department of Education and Science and the Countryside Commission, and by a consortium of local authorities, including Hampshire, one of the co-hosts of the conference in Winchester. LTL maintains a close working relationship with the Department of Education and Employment (as it is now called), and collaborated on the production of a new Building Bulletin, *School Grounds; a Guide to Good Practice*² (see Book Reviews, p. 20).

During the last decade, there has been a growing interest in environmental education in schools. This has become more rigorous in many countries, following commitments made at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, relating to Agenda 21, biodiversity and sustainable development.

In many countries there are regulations or guidelines relating to the design of the land around schools, although the reality is often different with unattractive, cramped, and overcrowded sites. While almost all school buildings throughout the developed world have some land around them, they vary hugely in size from a few square metres to many hectares. The importance attached to these environments varies enormously. For many of the architects who design new schools the surrounding grounds are often an afterthought in the design process. In some cultures there are strongly developed notions of outdoors teaching, while in others, school grounds are used simply to allow pupils to let off steam and teachers to retreat to their staff room.

The organisation of the school day is another influential factor. Schools which cover most of their academic work in long morning sessions leave little chance for pupils to explore the informal learning opportunities of mid-morning and lunch time breaks.

LTL has established the range of services which schools require to enable them to use and develop their grounds. These include advice and information, a substantial range of publications providing technical, curriculum and other support, training and, very importantly, the evidence of research into best practice gathered from the thousands of active UK schools. In addition, LTL has undertaken a necessary advocacy role to counter a general view in society that buildings are more important than landscape. It has also created structures to support and co-operate with a wide range of agencies

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2. *School Grounds; a Guide to Good Practice*, Learning Through Landscapes, ed., Department for Education and Employment, 1997.

and professions involved and interested in school grounds.

In the last decade there has been an explosion of interest internationally in schools grounds. This led to the creation, in 1995, of the first International School Grounds Day. On 3 May, 1997, thousands of schools in 11 different countries celebrated this event.

In parallel, exciting initiatives to support school grounds developments have also emerged at national, regional and local levels in both developed and developing countries world-wide. While children and young people remain the ultimate focus of concern for all these agencies, their nature, structure and scope is wide and varied. This mirrors the range of issues which school grounds involve and the fact that the work has relevance for education-ists, architects, landscape architects, environmentalists, planners, parents and local and national governments.

Grounds for Celebration was the first international opportunity for people from these professional backgrounds to meet, exchange information, identify and debate common issues and consider strategic approaches to achieving change

and improvement. The programme was designed to meet two main objectives: a celebration of what has been achieved and the identification of effective strategies for the future.

Workshop presentations provided an opportunity for participants to learn more about developments in Canada, America, Sweden, Bermuda, the UK and Boston, USA. Clearly, every country was different but through this diversity it became clear that there were common needs in relation to training, support structures and services. The three conference themes were explored through workshop presentations and discussions, so that all participants could consider the complex relationships between design, pupil behaviour, delivery of curriculum subjects etc., and identify the common benefits which result from using and developing school grounds. The study tours provided opportunities to meet children and hear and see examples of what some schools in the UK are achieving.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

A full report of the proceedings will be published shortly. However, some of the key findings included:

- student behavioural improvements are seen most clearly through reduced vandalism and abuse of the grounds and schools;
- an evidence of changing relationships between teachers, students, parents and the local community. The integrated process breaks down some of the barriers between races, abilities and generations;
- the fact that children involve a developed sense of pride, ownership and identity in a space that is very



important to them, and that they have a role in developing and caring for, is seen as very empowering;

- school grounds became an aid to developing a different pedagogy, one that enhanced the relationship between the head and the heart;
- government policy is changing through the non government sector advocacy work – increased funds for local advocacy, teacher training policy makers, fund raising, grants, resources etc. Once the community is convinced, resources are made available;
- the close relationship between the built and natural environments was demonstrated, although this is different from country to country;
- outside support agencies, partnerships, outside networks and responsibility for schools grounds differ from country to country.

This conference and the subsequent report provide a unique and exciting opportunity to advance the cause of school grounds improvement world-wide. This stimulating and thought provoking meeting, which is an important landmark, will help to ensure that future generations of children will no longer be educated in the inadequate school grounds of the past.

