

“THEY ALL CARED ABOUT THE FOREST”: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES OF THE LOSS OF A WOODED PLAY SPACE AT A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

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Abstract

This qualitative investigation explored how children at a private school in upstate New York articulated their sense of loss of a wooded play space that had previously been available to them during recess. Research methods included participant observation, classroom focus groups, and teacher interviews. Results of this study indicate that the woods had afforded opportunities for creative play that other parts of the school grounds did not. Children had developed a sense of attachment to the woods as a home and community, and shared the loss of plants, animals, and access to nature. From an environmental education standpoint, the woods had afforded opportunities for creative play with and in the vegetation, direct contact with nature, and the chance to bond to a natural place, through the construction of forts. Ultimately, the children’s greatest benefit may have been the sense of care that had developed in all who had played there.

1.0 Introduction and Purpose

Currently, throughout the world, the natural environment is being despoiled by a variety of human practices. Such environmental impacts include pollution by industries and automobiles, the overdrawing of aquifers, and urban and suburban sprawl. Increasing development pressures due to population growth and demographic shifts are leading to extensive habitat loss, and threatening global biodiversity (Kellert 1996). One potential means of enhancing the health of global environments entails expanding the range of opportunities for children to experience nature. According to Pyle’s concept of the extinction of experience (1993), children who grow up with limited exposure to diverse natural environments may develop

into adults who are unconcerned about the loss of biodiversity. Prevention of the extinction of experience hinges upon providing children with exposure to natural habitats on a regular basis. In addition, Sobel (1998) and Shepard (1982) have argued that middle childhood (between the ages of 6 and 12) may represent a critical period for children’s engagement with nature, and the corresponding development of a sense of environmental stewardship. One obvious opportunity for encouraging children’s regular engagement with nature is the recess schoolyard (Cooper Marcus 1978; Frost 1987; Malone and Tranter 2003).

Typically in the United States, however, elementary school recess takes place on schoolyards comprised largely of asphalt, augmented by manufactured play equipment (Sobel 2004). Biodiversity is altogether absent, with green spaces usually restricted to monocultures of turf for active sports. These recess grounds, in turn, reflect theories of childhood outdoor play dating back to the 19th century. These theories emphasize children’s need to expend excess energy (Spencer 1873), recuperate from academic work (Lazarus 1873), or to practice motor skills necessary in adulthood (Groos 1901). Schoolyard design tends to follow an “outdoor gymnasium” model, first codified in the National Recreation Association Guidelines in 1928. Indeed, all the playground equipment described in those guidelines was still available from manufacturers in the late 1980s (Frost 1987). It is highly uncommon to find American elementary schools that have included natural spaces, available for children’s unstructured play, as part of their schoolyards.

This study was intended to explore the outdoor recess opportunities provided to children attending a private Montessori school in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. In keeping with the Montessori philosophy of education and child development, children are provided with freedom to explore the natural environment with minimal intervention from adults (Kahn 1999; Montessori 1966). For many years, students have been given the opportunity to play during recess on a blend of both conventional school grounds and an adjacent natural landscape of woods and an overgrown field. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore

elementary schoolchildren's use of that natural space at recess. In particular, the study was intended to examine what kinds of play were occurring there, and how the natural environment was integrated into their play. In what ways, if any, might the children's play in a natural setting be affecting their outlook on nature? Was their play translating into interest in, and/or concern for, the natural environment? Had the children who played regularly in the woods developed an attachment to that place, and if so, how did that attachment manifest itself?

2.0 Setting and Research Methods

Finger Lakes Montessori School (a pseudonym) is located on the outskirts of a small city in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. At the time of this study, the school had approximately 160 pupils, from pre-K through 8th grade. Classrooms were multi-age: Lower Elementary classes included 1st through 3rd graders, while Upper Elementary was for 4th through 6th graders. Outdoor recess for both Lower and Upper Elementary students occurred immediately after lunch every day, and lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Depending upon the weather and time of year, up to 110 children were outside at once during that time.

The school grounds included approximately 1.5 acres of predominantly non-natural playing areas, including a soccer field, an asphalt basketball court, a wooden play structure on gravel, and the school's gravel parking lot. In addition to the developed area, students also had access to approximately three acres of woods and overgrown field; most of this area, however, actually belonged to the adjoining landowner. Although at least one teacher patrolled the area during recess, there were frequently times when children could play relatively unobserved by adults.

This investigation was conducted from October to December, 2003. The first stage of data collection consisted of participant-observation sessions at recess, conducted in accordance with a naturalistic inquiry methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The second stage included classroom focus-group sessions. During the final stage, interviews were conducted with several classroom teachers and the school physical education instructor. Focus group conversations and interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Typed participant observation notes and focus group/interview

transcripts were coded in order to identify emerging themes (Bogdan and Biklen 1998).

3.0 The Loss of the Woods

Evidence of the children's use of the wooded space for extensive creative play was provided by a view of the woods from the edge of the school parking area on the first visit. The wooded area contained more than a dozen constructions the children called "forts", ranging from hollowed areas within the trees and bushes to elaborate constructions of found and natural materials, including tarps, burlap, string, and stone slabs. The woods and field were further honeycombed with trails, many of which had been "improved" by the children through the use of flat stones laid down in particularly wet spots.

Over the course of my first three visits, a detailed picture of the children's use of the natural areas began to emerge. Each recess, approximately 30 to 40 children would occupy the woods, sometimes working on additions/modifications to their "forts" (as they were universally called), at other times engaging in more active play that involved running along the trails through the woods. The forts were typically constructed with a variety of manmade and natural materials, including tarps, pieces of burlap, interwoven sticks, string, and fishing line. Interior furnishings included old shelves and tables/benches made of large stone slabs and cinder blocks, with various containers from old mixing bowls to pottery fragments. Play incorporated a blend of objects brought from home or in the school, found objects (such as a glass bottle), and natural materials. Vegetation was widely integrated into their play: pine cones were considered currency; berries were used to make "dyes"; and sticks had multiple uses, from swords to digging tools. Some groups of children pretended to be robbers; one group imagined that it was living in the distant past; and yet another group re-created parts of the school building in its fort.

Many locations and features in the woods and field had been named, though the same name was not necessarily used by all the children. Named places included The Shady Glade, The Herb Field, The Stream, The Frog Pond, and The Teeter-Totter Tree. Children also shared an extensive knowledge of actual and/or imagined place history. One child explained that one of the paths was called Old Main Street, because it was the first trail. Another child indicated where forts had been in the past. One patch of underbrush, for example, had been

someone's fort the previous year, and for that reason, the area was not available for current use.

Meanwhile the neighbor and owner of the wooded lot, unbeknownst to the school, had decided to clear a swathe of woods and dig a drainage ditch on the land. The trees were cleared on a Friday morning; by recess on the following Monday, a ditch had been dug through the cleared area. The ditch effectively isolated the students from all but a thin band of trees along the edge of the schoolyard. The forest was gone.

The fourth field visit to the school took place on the Friday in which the trees were cut down. An extensive swath of trees had been cleared, and several forts had been obliterated in the process. Children arriving on the scene during recess were visibly affected by this event. Many children wandered around the ruined area, asking adults on recess duty why the trees had been cut down, and who was responsible. Some children burst into tears, while others became angry (one child even declaring that he wanted to "riot"). Still other children, seeing the new downed vegetation available, started collecting branches and logs and hauling them off to their still-standing forts. Like many of the children, the teachers also admitted they were surprised and shocked by what had occurred. In later interviews with some of the teachers, they explained that they had not been aware that the children had been playing on the neighbor's property.

Approximately two weeks later, one of the school teachers allowed several students to cross the ditch, in order to obtain material (such as tarps) from forts that had been isolated on that side. Three groups of children rebuilt their forts, in the patch of trees remaining or else in the overgrown field area. However, in subsequent participant observation sessions, fewer than half the children were observed playing in the cleared area and remaining band of trees than had been seen there before the trees were cleared. By December of 2003, the school had erected a fence running along the near side of the ditch, in order to prevent access to it altogether.

As a result of these events, while the general research purpose remained unchanged, the study shifted its focus to the children's experiences of loss. Focus groups were utilized in order to explore what had been lost when the trees were cut down, from the children's points of view. This method also enabled the researcher to ascertain what

opportunities and experiences the woods had offered that were no longer available on the playground. Children also talked about their favorite activities and places in the woods, and about how recess had changed since the forest was cleared. They also voiced their frustrations about how they had not been told that the trees were going to be cut down, and had been entirely unprepared to deal with the loss. Their remarks revealed feelings of loss of a treasured home and of access to nature, while also suggesting a corresponding reduction in opportunities for creative outdoor play.

4.0 Emerging Themes

4.1 "Nothing to Do"

One complaint commonly shared by elementary school children in focus groups, particularly at the Lower Elementary (1st through 3rd grade) level, was that there recess was more boring since the trees had been cut down. One child remarked, after the ditch had been dug, "There's nothing really to do... Right now I just wander around doing nothing all recess" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 65). Another child asserted, "...there's no place to play" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 77). Still another explained that "Now we, like, don't have much to do but tag games and stuff like that" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 66).

Based upon field observations, together with interviews with teachers who had had recess duty, however, children's complaints did not appear to describe what was happening at recess. Few children were seen wandering aimlessly; instead, adults observed an increase in physical activity on the playground after the trees were cut down. More children were witnessed chasing each other, particularly in the gravel parking area. An increase in physical interactions among the students, such as tussling and wrestling, was also noticed. If the children were still finding things to do, then, why did so many complain of boredom?

These expressions of boredom suggest that the children did not have opportunities to play in the ways that many preferred, and had to settle for conventional tag games. Woodland play had been highly imaginative in nature, incorporating an array of found items (natural and otherwise) as raw material. With the woods gone, access to those materials was considerably reduced. The network of forts and paths in the woods had also offered the children a more challenging setting for chase games, as well as a variety of locations to "hang out" with a small

social group in relative privacy. Many children remarked on their loss of opportunities for privacy once the woods were lost. As one child observed, "...you couldn't see anyone because all the trees were in leaves" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 66). Another child told how "It used to be enclosed, and little secret passageway. Now it's just one big open area that no one wants to play in anymore, and it's ruined" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 76).

4.2 The Loss of a Home

While many of the younger children's remarks indicated feelings of attachment toward their forts, the older (Upper Elementary) children expressed this attachment in a more articulate way. One sixth grader reminisced about her time in fourth grade, when she spent her recesses with some sixth grade friends in a fort. "We got these huge sticks, it was like a tipi. We would sit in there. And we had bowls that we had found by the...fence, and we would put, like, sticks and stuff — it was **so** cool. ... We found...fence material.... And we would bring our own scissors, and we would cut, like, thatch stuff, and...weave it. You know in the Middle Ages, they had those houses, all thatched roof? That's how it was.... And then, by the end of the year, it was like a house that we had" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 75). A Lower Elementary child expressed a similar feeling when she related how "a lot of people had worked on our fort really, really, really hard, and then it just got destroyed, and we had to turn it...into this bigger fort, that doesn't really belong to us. Now we have no fort" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 92). These children's accounts suggest that the children felt a sense of belonging to their forts, which served as their homes on the school playground.

Children's sense of place attachment extended to other parts of the wooded landscape beyond individual forts. Many children told of their favorite trees or other special places. One commonly mentioned site was the Teeter-Totter tree, a low-branching tree with a long log balanced in its cleft. One Upper Elementary child told how the log had "been there for years — even longer than we've been here" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 69). Another location in the woods that was special to three Lower Elementary schoolchildren was a large flat stone. As one of them explained, "We used to play on this big rock, and they took it away, and they buried it. And now we can't play on it. And that's very sad, because we used to pretend like we had picnics, like we'd do our own mud-cakes, and picking berries, but now we can't do that anymore"

(Field Notes, 2003, p. 84). Then another member of the trio added, "We had to make a grave for Rock — that's what the big stone was called" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 84). For those children, the stone was not merely a device or setting for play, but was actually a treasured co-participant in the process.

Based upon children's accounts of their loss of forts and other special places, it is the researcher's interpretation that the children's place attachment had developed as a sense of home and community. While many children shared a personal sense of belonging (to a particular fort, for instance), they also belonged to a community of children who played in the woods. The community was united by certain kinds of play, by a shared currency of pine cones, and by the shared impact of the loss of the forest. One child, talking about rebuilding the largest fort after the loss, remarked, "It's just like...when people are in a place and their village burns up or something, they start rebuilding somewhere else. And that's sort of what happened" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 95). That village included all the children who played in the woods, and, at times (such as the account of Rock, above) even extended to the nonhuman elements of the woods, such as and trees.

4.3 The Loss of Nature

Some of the children, describing the aftermath of the trees being cut down, spoke of the loss of access to nature itself. One child explained that, in the deep woods, distant and sheltered from the activity of the playground, "...it was really nice, it was, like, overgrown with nature. It was really cool. It wasn't all trampled down or anything, and like, it was heaven" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 71). Another child explained that she loved her fort because "I didn't make it, it was just a natural thing, like, it was, made out of, like, nature, really. And it was very special to me, and then they cut it down" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 90).

Most children spoke of the obvious loss of the trees, which, as several explained, had provided them with shade, shelter, privacy, and oxygen. A few children also remarked about the harm to animals as a result of the cut. Usually, the children did not indicate particular animals. Instead, they spoke of animals that formerly had homes in the trees or had fed off of the leaves. One child remarked in particular about frogs having been "swept away" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 66). Two children remarked

about a bird whose nest had been situated in one of the trees that had been cut. "There was this hawk or something that flew around the school," one child noted, "...and I saw the hawk's nest on the ground, all scattered" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 85).

In the researcher's interpretation, based upon these children's comments about the loss of plants, animals, and nature itself, many children playing in the woods had developed an awareness of nature, valued it, and expressed a sense of its loss. This loss was evident in the children's emotional responses on the playground to the trees being cut down. It was also demonstrated by the subsequent efforts of one Lower Elementary class (guided by the classroom teacher) to circulate a petition within the school entitled, "Save Our Forest", and to write letters to the landowner. The impact of this loss was vividly captured by one Lower Elementary student, who remarked, "It just goes to show that...this happens around the world every day.... To me, before this happened, it didn't seem like how it destroyed most of the things when people cut down woods and jungles and things, but now I really know what it feels like to have that done."

5.0 Discussion: The Forest from a Pedagogical Perspective

During the course of this study, the school children were able to articulate a variety of ways that they had benefited directly from the opportunity to play in the woods. The forest had provided the children with (among other things) raw materials for forts, private places, challenging paths for chasing games, and the chance to connect to nature. When considered from the perspective of environmental education, the children's comments and experiences also suggest ways in which access to the woods had been of benefit to them pedagogically. In particular, as will be discussed below, the woods afforded opportunities for creative play both with and in the forest vegetation, daily direct contact with nature, and the opportunity to bond to a natural place, through the finding, building, and use of forts and other special places.

5.1 Play with/in Vegetation

According to the theory of loose parts (Nicholson 1971), the potential for children's discovery and creativity in a landscape is directly proportional to the number and variety of manipulable objects (loose parts) that the

landscape contains. Thus, a conventional playground with fixed equipment, asphalt, and grass contains a paucity of loose parts, and therefore does not encourage creative play. On the other hand, a landscape rich in loose parts, such as the woods with all its sticks, leaves, berries, rocks, and other items should foster a range of creative experiences. Vegetation is particularly beneficial in furnishing an array of play opportunities. In an anecdotal study of children's play in a natural setting, Moore (1988, p. 3) noted "the extent to which imaginative play and creative social interaction can be supported by a highly manipulative environment having plants as its primary play material." Through playing with the vegetation, the children also become more familiar with it; for example, they discover how grasses and weed stems can be tied together. Children's foraging for vegetation, from goldenrod "herbs" to berries for making dye, may even lead to the enhancement of personal competence in assessing the biodiversity of local habitats (Chepeniuk 1995). Childhood play with and in vegetation may aid children in discriminating between different plants and plant parts, enabling them to experience local biodiversity firsthand. At the same time, this play helps children to develop their imaginative and creative capacities as well as their skills of social interaction: in short, to have fun (Malone and Tranter 2003; Moore 1989).

5.2 Daily Contact with Nature

Childhood manipulation of a vegetated environment, in turn, affords daily direct contact with nature. In addition to foraging for plant parts, many of the children playing in the woods also gathered clay from the streambed, looked for frogs in a pond, used rocks to "pave" a trail, or carried woolly bear caterpillars or crickets in their hands. Pyle (2002) has argued that such direct contact with natural surroundings in childhood may be critical to avoid the extinction of experience, in which children who grow up experiencing the richness of their local natural environments become adults who value global biodiversity. Such direct encounters with nature in childhood may also be critical for healthy human development in the affective, cognitive, and evaluative domains (Kellert 2002). Shepard (1982) proposed that the ongoing human destructiveness toward nature (which he called "madness") is the direct result of arrested development caused in part by our estrangement from the natural world during childhood. The potential developmental benefits of children's direct contact with nature suggest the importance of bringing nature into

schoolyards, particularly in highly developed areas where children may have little other access to it. As Montessori observed more than half a century ago, "In our time and in the civilized environment of our society, children...live very far distant from Nature, and have few opportunities of entering into intimate contact with it or of having direct experience with it" (Montessori 1948, p. 104).

5.3 Bonding to Nature through Forts

According to Kylin (2003) who studied children's dens (another term for "forts") in Sweden, the dens served to concretize children's connections to their environment. In building a den, the children were quite literally making a meaningful place for themselves in nature. In a similar manner, Sobel (1990) described how children's forts resulted from a combination of natural raw materials and children's flexible imaginations. Sobel further suggested that adult sense of place and ecological concern may originate in the special places, such as forts, that children create. A feeling of being at home in nature in adulthood may have its beginnings in the homes children build in nature out of brush, sticks, tarps, and string.

6.0 Conclusion

Based upon the results of this investigation, the natural wooded area at Finger Lakes Montessori benefited the children who played there in numerous ways. Children had developed a sense of attachment to the woods as a home and community, and shared the loss of plants, animals, and access to nature. From an environmental education standpoint, the woods had afforded opportunities for creative play with and in the vegetation, direct contact with nature, and the chance to bond to a natural place, through the construction of forts. While potentially contributing to children's psychological development, encouraging their creativity, and connecting them to nature, it was also simply a fun place to be. And its destruction was a loss expressed by almost every elementary child who shared his or her thoughts during the several focus groups. As one child asserted, "Recess isn't as much fun as it was, because all I do is walk around and cry" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 66).

During a focus group with a handful of Upper Elementary students, one sixth grader made a plea for the younger children who had been playing in the woods, but could no longer do so. "They all cared about the forest and stuff," she declared, "and I did too, when I was that age.... I mean, all those little kids, they really care,

and it's just like, you know, to have someone who cares so much about one little thing, they should at least get it" (Field Notes, 2003, p. 74). Ultimately, the greatest argument for providing children with access to natural spaces on playgrounds, such as these three acres in upstate New York, may lie in the sense of care that could develop, over time, as a result of doing so.

7.0 Citations

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