

English

A voice for subjects

Learning outside the classroom

Taking children out of school adds excitement to our teaching. Going out into the wide world changes relations between you as a teacher, your class and what they are learning. Whether you are taking Reception children to a house nearby to see their chickens or your Year 3 class on a poetry journey around the school grounds, that time out of the classroom can enhance both past and future learning.

But there's another kind of outdoor learning that tends to get forgotten: what we can learn from children in the playground, where children re-enact narratives drawn from popular media, and engage in games that explore their present and future lives. Third year student teachers at De Montfort University examine children's informal language outside the classroom and consider its effect on their literacy development.

They approach children as ethnographers and researchers, rather than teachers.

Natasha writes:

Most prevalent on the playground were 'pretend' games. They varied between those that used stories and characters obviously derived from popular media and those that involved more of the children's own imaginative construction.

DRAMA

CROSS-SUBJECT LINK

Perhaps the most revealing results have come from interviews with children about what they are doing. Martin records how, using their imagination, a group of boys transform a bleak playground:

Child 1: Well, it's like the Playstation game...we just go around and we get the coins and pizza hut tokens ...

Martin: Where are the pizza hut tokens and coins?

Child 1: Well they're ...

Child 2: They're around. You know, like over there (he points to the corner of the playground). ... Well, that's the toy cupboard, and then there is the bedroom...

Child 1: Over there, that's the garden. Sometimes we can't get the coins...



For ideas on how to take writing beyond the classroom visit the Everybody Writes website, aimed at exploring writing beyond the classroom www.everybodywrites.org.uk

Similarly, influenced by a film, two children tell Carla how they play Monsters Inc, revealing a strong grasp of character and showing clear contrasts between the good and bad monsters through their use of language and actions.

Child A: You have sharp teeth and claws

Child B: Yeah, like Randall. I like being him; he's nasty and cheats and changes colour.

Having observed groups of Reception Year boys and girls, Louise writes:

'Many story lines of fantasy games can be compared to the genres of more traditional tales of heroes and monsters and good triumphing over bad'.

So what can we learn from observing children's unregulated play? Two student teachers' comments stand out:

'I learnt the value of using my knowledge of children's out of school interests in the classroom. The interest I showed in their interests was



reflected back to me through discussion and enjoyment.'

'This assignment helped me to learn about the lives of children outside school; it also made me aware of how children work together to structure the meaning of their lives.'

What's happening in your playground?

A fuller account of this work appears as Grugeon, E. 'Listening to learning outside the classroom: student teachers study playground literacies' (2005) *Literacy* 39,1, pp. 3-9

Stones and poetry



A visit to Jericho Valley, near St Agnes, provided poetical inspiration for a group of Year 5 Cornish children. At the beach they made a small collection of stones before each choosing a favourite to take back to school.

The group had already been introduced to a range of poetic forms, including haiku and kennings, and each child chose a poetic form to write in. The poems below are the final form as chosen by each child.

Jason uses personification and metaphor to portray the sea as an ageless and mischievous being, engaged in a sly game with children. There are strong visual aspects, particularly in the stone '*caught for an instant...plunges to its watery bed*'. His word choice, too, is adventurous: the 'stony voice', the stone 'hurled slyly'. Note the contrast between the sea's chuckle and the child's laugh, and the juxtaposition of the image of the master craftsman, smoothing the stone to perfection, and the speed of the game of catch.

Treasure of the Sea Jason, age 10.

Below the waves, a stony voice
chuckles in glee
mill stones roll back and forth
slowly
until smoothed to a fine quality,
shaped by a master-craftsman.
Thrown high in happiness by
the sea,
or hurled slyly against the
rock-hugging cliff,
the sea leaves his treasures
carelessly on beaches

knowing many hands will
return them:
A child laughs, a stone skims
the waves,
caught for an instant, then
plunges to its watery bed.

Perran drew on his enjoyment of kennings to write a carefree response to the idea of a stone lying on a beach in Cornwall. Line three is particularly effective in presenting two unelaborated images, 'a shark fin, a seagull's wing' before moving on to extended description in line 4.

It's...
A sticky sweet that's been
sucked a thousand times,
A tooth that has worn smooth,
A shark fin, a seagull's wing.
A mini-motor boat that skims
the surf and is gobbled up by
the waves...

Josh, a keen writer, makes use of full rhyme: sea/mystery/me; and half-rhyme: mystery/angrily. He uses alliteration in the second stanza, the careful choice of verbs ensuring that the work is read slowly. The wistful quality of this poem had a powerful effect on visitors to the classroom where it was displayed.

Pearls Josh, age 9

Pearls from the sea,
a mystery.
The tide brings them in,
loudly, angrily.



It always makes me wonder
if they had
a mother, father,
like you and me.
The soft sea whispered,
'My daughter...'
And the tall cliffs echoed,
'My son...'
And together they whispered,
'Our children.'

Encouraged by the success of this project, the stone selection exercise was repeated with the whole class. The children were then taught how to write a cinquain and it was noticeable that the least able writers enjoyed a great deal of success with this particular form, possibly due to the economy of language and constraints of syllable counting.

The children's experiences of seeing, listening and touching proved invaluable in the development of their own poetry writing.

Playing out



Chanting playground rhymes

The potential for literacy learning to take place outdoors is immense and carefully planned, yet simple activities can take advantage of natural resources, the local environment and even the weather!

Simple outdoor activities which need few resources

3–8 years

- ▶ Sing, chant and play out street or playground rhymes, or traditional skipping songs and counting rhymes.
- ▶ Take a stroll around the local neighbourhood, play 'I spy with my little eye', and make an alphabet book out of what the children see.

MUSIC

CROSS-SUBJECT LINK

- ▶ Use a digital camera on a walk to the local park; make an *In the Park* colour book.
- ▶ Reading outdoors can be a delight and inspirational! 'Extreme reading' events



proliferated during the National Year of Reading 2008 (see what happened at Woodlands Junior School by typing 'Woodlands' into the search box at www.yearofreading.org.uk/wikireadia

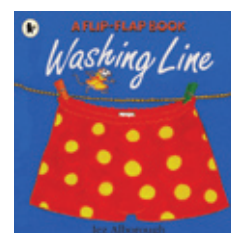
- ▶ Role-play in 'cubby houses' or dens; creating lots of opportunities for talking and listening as the children act out roles.

Themed outdoor play boxes linked with sets of story books

Themed, structured play boxes can allow links to be made with the outdoor environment. Ideas include: Windy/Sunny/Rainy Day Box; Decorating/Gardening Box; Café/Picnic Box. The contents of a Windy Day Outdoor Play Box could include:

- ▶ a real washing line at an accessible height and a washing bowl, soapsuds and bubble blower
- ▶ items of clothing or flags, streamers, pieces of different material or handkerchiefs
- ▶ alphabet letters, days of the week or whole words to peg on the line in an ordered sequence.

A set of books linked to the box provides a focus to the play. Many books have references to windy washing days, e.g. *Washing Line* by Jez Alborough; *Mrs Mopple's Washing Line* by Anita Hewitt; *The Wind Blew* by Pat Hutchins;



Grandpa's Handkerchief by Dorothy Clark; *A Fox Got My Socks* by Hilda Offen.

Young children might start their outdoor play activities by listening to *Mrs Mopple's Washing Line*. Using the artefacts from the 'Windy Day Box' the children can peg out the items of clothing in the order they are in the book, talking about which came first, second, third or place the items of washing largest to smallest, thinnest to thickest.

MATHS

CROSS-SUBJECT LINK

A Fox Got My Socks is another wonderful windy day washing story with verse to chant and inspire production of the children's own rhyming words.

English doesn't have to be an indoor activity! Sheer enjoyment of books can be enhanced through related outdoor play – at one with the elements.



UKLA

UKLA promotes good practice in English teaching. It has a strong membership in the Primary sector of professionals committed to developing literacy education. As well as offering professional support, members receive *Literacy News* with accounts of UKLA activities and projects, *English 4-11*, published jointly with the English Association, and *Literacy*, which reports research with clear classroom implications. Greenwich University is the site of UKLA's International Conference, from 10th to 12th July 2009. Speakers include Malorie Blackman, Robin Alexander and Teresa Cremin. Details and application forms at www.ukla.org

Recent publications:

Dyslexia and Inclusion: supporting classroom reading with 7-11 year olds
Rosemary Anderson offers practical advice for SENCOs, teachers and assistants to support dyslexic pupils in ways that promote effective learning and ensure inclusion.

Practical Bilingual Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms
Tözün Issa and Alayne Öztürk provide guidance for practitioners in supporting bilingual learners, helping teachers meet the challenge of catering effectively for the variety of needs within their classrooms and settings.

(Each publication £7 to members, £8 to non-members)



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English Association

Established in 1995, the *English 4-11* Book Awards are presented by the journal *English 4-11* to authors and illustrators of the Best Children's Illustrated Books of the year, Key Stage 1 Fiction and Non-Fiction, and Key Stage 2 Fiction and Non-Fiction. Following the presentation in May, a flyer with short reviews of all winning and shortlisted books is distributed free to all subscribers to *English 4-11*, to bookshops, libraries and other interested bodies. Would your school like a copy of the latest Book Awards flyer?

email: engassoc@le.ac.uk with the heading 'Awards Flyer', including your name and address.

In a recent issue of *English 4-11* Chris Holifield asks 'Where have all the children's poetry books gone?' When primary school children encounter poetry they enjoy it. So why are publishers reluctant to commit themselves to new ventures? How do you encourage children to read books? The 'book resistant' reader is Rob Sanderson's target; he suggests ways of getting children hooked into the world of books for life.

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NATE (National Association for the Teaching of English)

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