Being Confined within? Constructions of the Good Childhood and Outdoor Play in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings in Ireland

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This study is based on a study of the experience of the outdoors in early childhood education and care settings in Ireland. Central to the analyses are the inter-linkages drawn between constructions of a ‘good’ childhood, and children’s ‘need’ for outdoor play, as well as the contradictions which arise around competing discourses of safety and protection versus play and autonomy in the structuring of children’s everyday lives. The findings indicate that the outdoors is increasingly marginalised in young children’s everyday experiences. Conclusions are drawn with reference to the implications for the development of real and meaningful outdoor play experiences for children in early childhood education and care settings. © 2009 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2009 National Children’s Bureau.

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Introduction

Recent analyses within the sociology of childhood highlight the significance of time and space to the structuring of children’s everyday lives and how broader changes in ‘modernity’ have significant implications for their general welfare and well-being (James and James, 2008; Zeiher and Others, 2007). One feature of modernity has been the institutionalising of childhood space – the demarcation of specific places within which children are gathered, primarily for the purposes of play, learning and ‘caring’.

In Ireland, the evolution of formalised early childhood education and care spaces is a relatively recent phenomenon. While there has been a traditional divide between the informal ‘childcare’ sector in the early years¹ and the more formal ‘education sector’ (located in the early years of primary schooling),² significant steps have recently been taken in the development, of a coherent and inclusive policy for early childhood education and care. For the first time ever state policy aims to transcend all types of early childhood education and care provision for children under six years, placing at its centre, the rights and needs of children in the early years to experiences that contribute positively to their well-being, learning and development (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2004).³

In this study, we wish to consider some of the contradictions, which arise between policy and practice, with particular reference to the provision of outdoor play opportunities⁴ in early childhood education and care settings. Such contradictions may be framed in terms of contrasting discourses in relation to the construction of a ‘good’ childhood, centred on
autonomy, freedom, protection and safety, as well as tensions in the dynamics of power and control between adults and children.

**Discourses about children and outdoor play in early childhood education and care settings in Ireland**

A review of discourse in relation to the ‘good’ childhood in Irish society reveals the cultural politics at play in the formation of such discourses and the central role of power in children’s positioning as a social group with distinct needs, duties and rights (Devine, 2008). Since the rapid economic expansion of the last 10 years, Irish society now displays many of the hallmarks of social change in the Western developed world, including tensions that arise in accommodating to the multiple demands of work, learning and caring in the structuring of everyday life. Dominant discourses in relation to childhood are characterised by heightened fearfulness regarding children’s vulnerability to risk and dangers outdoors (Elsey, 2004; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997), as well as concerns over the proliferation of indoor play technologies (Buckingham, 2000; Devine and others, 2004), rising levels of childhood obesity (Government of Ireland, 2005; Reilly, 2007) and the disconnection of children from the natural world outdoors (Louv, 2005; Stein, 2001).

Shifting discourses on childhood also emphasise not only constructs of development and education in line with children’s ‘needs’ but also the rights of the child, and the inclusion of children’s voices in decisions that directly affect them (Devine, 2002; Hayes and Kernan, 2008). Time and space to play outdoors is now recognised both as a need and right of children and central to their well-being and development (Mackett and Paskins, 2008; Moore, 1997, OECD Directorate for Education, 2006; Powell, 2009). Critically, when given the opportunity to talk about what is important in their lives, space and time to play outdoors has been demonstrated as being at the top of children’s own agenda (Government of Ireland, 2000). Such trends are evident in recent policy documents in Ireland, including the National Children’s Strategy (2000), and the subsequent development of a national children’s play policy (Government of Ireland, 2004). Furthermore, the importance of both the indoor and outdoor environments in creating possibilities for fun, creativity and social interaction, underpins the vision enshrined in the recently published consultative document on a national curricular framework for early years learning (NCCA, 2004).

While at a policy level there are shifts taking place in the discourse about children, questions arise as to practices with children in a range of institutional spaces, and what these signify in terms not only of relations of power between adults and children but also the tensions between competing discourses around what is in the ‘best interest’ of the child (Devine, 2008). Discourses do not arise in a vacuum but from distinct processes that are tied to constructs of identity and processes of subjectification (Foucault, 1979). Discourses are framed in turn by power relations, in the capacity to define what is ‘good’ (normal) and in modernity, the resultant realisation of goals (norms) through institutionalised practices which regulate time, space and the body. In outlining, the implications of modernist constructs of childhood for the organisation of childhood spaces, for example, Zeiher and others (2007: 15–18) consider the construction of ‘protective’ and ‘separate’ spaces for children primarily through caring and learning institutions and the prioritisation of performative discourses that increasingly inform pedagogical practices within them. Furthermore, James and James (2008) note the contradictory discursive location of children in societies characterised by individualisation and ‘riskiness’. While state discourse in the UK articulates the need to listen
to and empower children, state policies, underpinned by a moral panic about childhood, ‘dis-able’ children from making choices by seeking to create a ‘risk-free cultural environment that is highly governed and controlled’ (Ibid:113). Similarly Clarke and Waller (2007) draw attention to the notion of ‘safe guarding’ children in policy discourses on early childhood education and care across the different countries of the United Kingdom and the Ireland.

We have then discourses about what a ‘good’ childhood is, which shift over time, space and place. Increasing trends toward flexibilisation and self determination in the use of time (Zeiher, 2007), coincide with constructs of children as agentic and reflective, most often epitomised by their capacity to engage imaginatively and spontaneously, through play, in a world that is often separate from that of adults (Dyblie Nilsen, 2008; Markstrom and Hallden, 2008; Strandell, 2007). Simultaneously, attendance at school and early childhood education and care settings, as well as moral panics over the ‘riskiness’ of modern society set constraints on children’s action, through the regulation of their time and space in such institutionalised settings (Fog Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Kampmann, 2004; Kjørholt and Tingstad, 2007). The proliferation of more structured learning environments for young children in Ireland typifies general trends toward the insularisation and domestication of children’s everyday lives identified elsewhere (Mayall, 2002; Zeiher, 2003). Given the increasing confinement of children in separate spaces, it is opportune to consider what value is placed on the outdoors in early childhood education and care settings and children’s visibility in the outdoor domain. The remainder of this study will consider some of these issues in the context of the construction of a ‘good’ childhood in early childhood education and care settings in Ireland.

Methodology

A multi-dimensional study into the experiences of the outdoors in four diverse early childhood education and care settings was conducted over one year in a large urban centre in Ireland. Consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods, at the core of the research was the exploration of the outdoor experiences of eight focal children aged between one and five years, prioritising a visual ethnographic approach (Schratz and Steiner-Loffler, 1998). Fieldwork incorporated prolonged observational fieldnote taking, digital photography, informal interviews with the three-, four- and five-year-old children and a ‘Day in the life Diary’ completed by parents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of significant adults to identify the discourses about childhood, play and the outdoors they drew upon in framing their own interactions with young children.

At each stage of the process cognisance was taken of fundamental ethical principles in relation to both the adult and child participants (Aubrey and others, 2000; Flewitt, 2005) including the right to be adequately informed about the purposes and outcomes of the research, the right to anonymity, and to be guarded against possible harm or distress. An overview of national practice in relation to the provision of outdoor play in early childhood education and care settings was also obtained through the inclusion of questions related to play outdoors in a national survey of 1500 early childhood education and care settings (Pobal, 2006). This study focuses on two specific but inter-related areas arising from the analysis:

1 The place of the outdoors in early childhood education and care in Ireland.
2 Constructions of a ‘good’ childhood and outdoor play: challenges and contradictions.
Setting the context: the place of the outdoors in early childhood education and care in Ireland

An overview of practice in relation to the outdoors in early childhood education and care settings at a national level (derived from the responses of 1236 childcare providers with a response rate of 82%), indicated that 11% had no access to a dedicated outdoor space. Where outdoor space was provided, this was of limited design, characterised by a predominance of grass and safety surfaces which precluded varied and risk-rich experiences (Hendricks, 2001). Wheeled toys and sand were the most common play activities made available (63% and 52% respectively), while swings and climbing frames were present in 40% of services overall. Trees, shrubs, flowers and water were available in only 38% of services.

In terms of time outdoors, Table 1 below indicates that the most common category of time outdoors was during scheduled daily times, all year round, by 44.4% of service providers. In addition, 24.4% noted that children were free to access the outdoors whenever they chose.

Within the case study settings, we see in Table 2 the limited nature of the children’s outdoor activities, both in terms of the design of outdoor spaces affiliated to each setting, and restrictions on their freedom to access the outdoors. This was particularly evident in Parkside Nursery and Hilltop Community Playgroup.

The clearest commonality across the four settings was the invisibility of the settings, and the children within the settings, to the neighbourhood and local community. This is in marked contrast for example to recommendations in the Reggio Emilia approach where the daily life of children and teachers are envisioned as ‘a visible point of reference for the community’ (Gandini, 1998: 164), and the spaces surrounding the schools, are considered as extended classroom space (Gandini, 1998). In Ireland, the restriction in access to the outdoors noted at national level and in the case studies, exists in spite of recent increasing national and international attention at policy level highlighting the importance of children’s right to varied experiences of play. This suggests the need to probe further into the discourses that surround the provision of outdoor play experiences and how these are tied into often competing constructions of a ‘good’ childhood in Irish society.

Constructions of a ‘good’ childhood and outdoor play: challenges and contradictions

Analysis from the pilot project highlighted how in the Netherlands, it was understood and accepted that children should have access to outdoors in all seasons. Similarly, Kjørholt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of time outdoors</th>
<th>No. settings</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children are free to access the outdoors throughout the day, and all year round</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors during scheduled times daily, all year round</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors three to five times weekly, all year round</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors three to five times weekly during Spring and Summer seasons only</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors one or two times weekly all year round</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors one or two times weekly during Spring and Summer seasons only</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children access the outdoors during occasional organised trips only</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1118</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Children’s access to the outdoors in the four case study settings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor-outdoor connectedness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Boundaried outdoor space of setting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wider outdoors in the community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkside Creche (Baby Unit)</td>
<td>Creche housed in renovated 4-storey Georgian house One large window in group room of focal group with prospect to bare concrete wall View to street and park in front barely possible due to height of window Creche invisible to neighbourhood</td>
<td>Very small flat yard at back (21 sq m) Safety surface laid mid-fieldwork North facing, dark, overhanging fire escape Same level Next to large construction site – noise, dust, debris Staff bring out balls, small buggies Accessed rarely during fieldwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Willow Day Nursery</td>
<td>Nursery housed in lower ground floor of Georgian house Windows and patio doors low to ground at back of building When doors opened (by adults), children can move independently out and in Materials brought from outdoors in, and from indoors out Nursery invisible to neighbourhood Small discreet sign, entrance hidden</td>
<td>Recently renovated south facing, ‘garden playground’ (110 m.sq.) Safety surface throughout Some nature elements – planting area, pots, willow tree Fixed large sand pit and slide structure Same level – (no steps, slopes, platforms) (except on sand pit, slide unit) Many wheeled toys and construction materials (brought outdoors from indoors) Daily access, weather permitting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltop Community Playgroup</td>
<td>Playgroup housed in new purpose-built room, extension to existing Community hall Windows, above children’s eye level – covered in wire grille for security Outdoors not brought in – indoors not brought out Playgroup invisible to community – plans to erect sign</td>
<td>Grassed and shrubbed area surrounding building not considered secure and safe by early years practitioners: • children can be ‘out of view’ outdoors possibility of finding • hazardous rubbish • can escape to road. No access allowed during playgroup session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepside Infant School</td>
<td>Indoor–outdoor connectedness</td>
<td>Boundaried outdoor space of setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal group: four-to-five-year-olds</td>
<td>Infants housed in 1940s purpose-built school building</td>
<td>Designed and equipped playground part grass, part safety surface, part concrete (260 m. sq. approx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Windows high off ground</td>
<td>Different levels (steps, climbing structures); slopes (wheelchair slope, slide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoors not visible to children while in their classrooms</td>
<td>Nature elements, water, trees, grass (partially accessible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoors brought indoors in form of planting activities</td>
<td>Weekly access to playground weather permitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School activities not visible to community</td>
<td>School Yard — Bare open space, hopscotch markings on ground, 4 skipping ropes, 2 basketballs available to share some days Daily access weather permitting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2002) and Dyblie Nilsen (2008) outline the significance of children’s play outdoors to the construction of a good Norwegian childhood, and how values related to autonomy, participation and citizenship are reflected in the opportunities provided for children to play visibly, in the outdoors. For the purposes of analysis, three interconnected themes have been identified from our data that elaborate the vision of a ‘good’ childhood which underscored provision of outdoor play in Irish settings: childhood as a time of freedom, a natural and sensorially rich childhood, and a safe childhood. The analysis also highlights the tensions that emerged in the realisation of these constructs in practice. Pseudonyms for all settings, child and adult informants are used throughout.

**Childhood as a time of freedom**

The most prevalent value attributed to the outdoors was freedom and the consequential value to children’s physical health, well-being and well-becoming. In this sense moving about ‘freely’ in the outdoors was construed as ‘natural’ and a necessary part of being a child. Parents especially perceived children’s delight in such freedom of movement and derived satisfaction from observing their children’s enjoyment.

> I think their excitement and their sense of just running free. They take off … letting them go wild, I think that’s important for them. (Jennifer, mother of Conor, 1 year and 1 month)

Significantly, the adults recognised the constraints placed on the children in terms of this ‘freedom’ by virtue of their confinement in institutionalised spaces that were deemed to be crowded, stuffy and restrictive in design. Outdoor play was construed as providing a break from the more rigid work/time schedules indoors. As Martha in Stepside Infant school noted:

> [Children] like getting outside, they associate outside with the freedom and fun to do whatever they want. [Martha, early years practitioner (eyp), Stepside Infant School]

This association of the outdoors with freedom was also reflected in the comments of the children, typified in the response of Ella, a four-year-old girl in Willow Day Nursery when she said:

> you see inside you have to be quiet (whispers) and outside you can be louder.

Being outdoors was perceived by adults as improving children’s ‘form’, appetite, sleeping patterns and resilience to illness. Others made a link with reducing the risk of obesity and consequential long-term health benefits. Gender differences were commented upon by a number of interviewees and the disciplinary constraints and ‘temporal corset’ (Zeiher and others, 2007:12) arising from confinement in space was viewed as particularly challenging for boys who were perceived to need to ‘let off steam’ outdoors.

In spite of this, interviewees acknowledged the increasing time spent by children in modern society indoors and in cars, transported from one indoor space to another:

> Young children today are quite confined within, mainly, a house, within a car, within a pre-school, within a shopping centre, and they do have limited opportunity for outdoor play. (Pat, Pre-school Officer)
Constructions of a natural and sensorially rich childhood: ‘Outdoors is more than running around’

Notwithstanding these views, there was also evident within interviewee talk an equation of the outdoors with naturalness (contact with plant and animal life), and that a ‘good’ childhood was one which enabled children to explore and enjoy-rich sensorial experiences through their engagement with the outdoors. As stated by Anne in Willow Park Nursery:

I believe outdoors is more than running around … it’s living, it’s seeing lived things, whether it’s a snail or a daffodil coming up or a dead leaf falling from a tree.

Parents of the youngest children valued the sensorial experience for their babies and newly mobile children whose language was beginning to emerge.

I value just about everything, nature, animals, seeing, feeling trees, being close to water for him … he discovered moss on the wall and I told him straight away, its moss you know. (Aisling, mother of Tom 2 years and 4 month)

Inter-connected with the naturalness of the outdoors was also the association between a good childhood and access to gardens. Oftentimes, there was an intergenerational focus to this discourse and many interviewees drew upon memoried gardens from their own childhood in formulating an understanding of the necessity of a garden for a ‘proper’ childhood. Parents also described their efforts to recreate outdoor experiences or to re-enact memoried rituals from their own childhood in the upbringing of their children as recounted in the comments of Tony, father to three-year-old Rachel:

We used to play games, chasing mostly, cowboys and Indians up and down the hills … I’d bring her [Rachel – daughter] to the park, to do the same thing … I go back to my childhood, with my own mother.

Observational and field data indicated how, when given the opportunity to play outdoors, the children’s agency and ingenuity came to the fore, using themselves as play props, using features of the building (alcoves, posts, drainpipes) and small loose objects for their own exploratory and imaginative purposes. Viewed through the children’s eyes, as well as observations of their embodied expressions, a ‘good’ childhood in early childhood education and care settings included diverse possibilities for movement both horizontally and vertically in the outdoors. The data highlighted how the organisation of the children’s time and space significantly shaped not only their activities but also their social relations with others. In this latter respect, a number of adult interviewees commented on the potential for more fluid adult-child interactions in the outdoors, reiterating the value on ‘freedom’ noted previously:

Enjoyment comes from being together outdoors, of bonding … I value for them the freedom of being able to mooch around and discover things. (Liam, father of Anna 1 year and 1 month)

But often I go out and play with the children … maybe go around and join in a few games, you know just have a little bit of fun with the children yourself … you know it’s different even for you, from the classroom when you need to keep everything in order. (Martha, eyp, StepSide Infant School)
Within the more formalised spaces of early childhood education and care settings, however, the provision of ‘natural’ experiences was raised as increasingly problematic. Informants from two of the further education/teacher training colleges observed that there was an over-reliance on commercial/manufactured equipment over ‘real’ or naturally occurring materials in the design of early childhood education and care settings. Reflecting on her experience of inspecting over 200 such settings Pat, a Preschool Officer, remarked that she had never actually seen babies under about 15 months outdoors in any early years services she visited. She also noted the variability across services in how immersion in sensorially rich outdoor experiences was incorporated in the daily routines. Her views were reiterated by other interviewees:

In general, I would say that the provision is very poor — many playgroup services would not have outdoor areas or if they do they are underutilised. Outdoor areas are frequently boring and bland with minimum opportunities to engage in activities that offer challenge. (Ursula, Trainer)

The changing physical location of many early childhood education and care services from being based in living rooms of private houses with accessible back gardens to purpose built premises, which has accompanied the professionalisation and organisation of the sector, was highlighted as an issue. In this respect, ‘designed’ early childhood education and care settings were equated with the removal of naturally occurring garden elements from the outdoor experience. On a more general level, gardens for childhood play were perceived to be under threat from rising land values for building and an increase in the number of parents (specifically mothers) working outside the home, resulting in fewer adults ‘keeping on eye on children’ outdoors in neighbourhood spaces.

Overall there seems then to be a contradiction between interviewees acknowledgement of the importance of a ‘natural’ and sensorially rich childhood, yet an absence of outdoor provision in practice in early years settings. An understanding of this contradiction is more evident when located in the context of concerns regarding safety and the management of ‘risk’ in early childhood education and care settings.

A contested vision of a safe childhood outdoors

Perceived dangers outdoors have been identified as a key factor in the decline of the use of the outdoor environment within early childhood education and care (Baldock, 2001; Furedi, 2001). Moss (2005) analyses the tendency to regulate young children’s activities within the context of a broader regulatory trend that has become stronger in the last 30 years as the world has come to seem more threatening and competitive, less orderly and controllable. One consequence of this emphasis on the avoidance of risk is to remove all hazards from the outdoor space, eliminating important aspects of children’s learning such as challenge and risk-taking (New and others, 2005; Stephenson, 2003).

Within the present study, contrasting views on safety and the outdoors were evident. On the one hand, the outdoors was viewed as an important resource to be exploited in the pedagogical relationship between adults and children; on the other hand, a dangerous environment from which both children and adults needed protection. Some interviewees described the outdoors as providing an arena for children to develop confidence and a personal sense of security in learning about and managing risk in the context of spontaneous play. Many interviewees noted for example, that ‘falling’ was a natural part of childhood and not something children should always be protected from. The greatest perceived danger that
worried adults was the increased traffic volumes and fear of children being knocked down. Other dangers outdoors referred to included: broken glass, needles and condoms, the fear that ‘somebody would take them’, negative influence of hearing foul language, and various forms of dirt. Parents perceived themselves as being more fearful and anxious for their children’s safety than their parents’ generation.

Such concerns coincided with the introduction for the first time of regulations, at state level, which sought to standardise practice, including the provision of outdoor spaces, across the early childhood education and care sector, while simultaneously prioritising the elimination of the potential of any risk to children in the use of such spaces:11

The introduction of the pre-school regulations appears to have sparked fear amongst early childhood education and care providers … anecdotal evidence indicates that bushes, plants and grass have been removed for fear of hazards, and opportunities for exploration and freedom have been minimized for the same reason. (Paula High/Scope trainer)

The prioritisation of risk management in the design of outdoor spaces was also underpinned by an increasingly litigious culture, making it difficult for early years practitioners to balance children’s need for curiosity outdoors with the demands of safety regulations, inspections and insurance requirements. A cloud of litigation seemed to be similarly felt across all early childhood education and care settings.

I suppose my priority, if I was to be honest with you, is really making sure that I’m covered, insurance wise, and safety wise, that would be the first thing that would be foremost in my mind. (Sinead, Manager, Parkside Crèche)

The early years practitioners in Hilltop felt the personal weight of the threat of litigation to such an extent that they were not comfortable taking children outdoors:

We’re not in a position to [let the children out], because, it’s our head in the chopping block if anything goes wrong. (Martina, eyp Hilltop Community Playgroup)

Such patterns must be understood in terms of the construction of childhood as a period of risk and the resultant monitoring and surveillance of professionals in terms of the management of such risk. The findings suggest that a ‘comfort zone’ of practice evolves, in which more structured learning indoors predominates, and children’s capacity for ‘reflexive individuality’ (James and James, 2008:113) is curtailed. This awareness of the potential of the outdoors for processes of identity formation and interaction are reflected in Joan’s comment:

Relationships change entirely when you take people out … I think the adults take on a different role, as much and more than children when they leave the four walls … when we take away our comfort zone, then we are somebody else. (Joan, Manager, Willow Day Nursery)

Such comments also highlight underlying dynamics of power and control in adult/child relations and raise questions about the extent to which practice revolves around adult centred interests and priorities. In this sense ‘real’ learning is what takes place ‘indoors’ and which is more readily amenable to adult regulation and control. While the spontaneity and freedom afforded to children in the outdoors opens up the opportunity for more flexible adult/child interactions, it also challenges normative and perhaps more ‘comfortable’ assumptions around teacher/pupil identities (Devine, 2003). Furthermore, adult resistance to spending
time in the outdoors was also framed by some interviewees as culturally embedded, derived from the ‘damp’ Irish weather and constructions of the ‘Irish’ as an ‘indoor’ people:

Here in Ireland, we have become more [of an indoor country], as children are practically reared in cars, and also we stay indoors, we play indoors. (Carmel, Principal Stepside Infant School)

I always say we need to look at ourselves, really, as a people, or a culture … it’s really in our perception (of the weather), it’s the staff that have the biggest block to actually going outdoors, it’s not the children, they are always eager. (Pat, Pre-school Officer)

Concluding discussion

Time and space are cultural and social phenomena that significantly influence patterns and processes of action and interaction (Zeiher and others, 2007). The exercise of power underpins such processes, through the proliferation of discourses and the allocation of resources which shape and constrain action (Devine, 2003). Applied to the study of childhood, Strandell (2007: 49) notes that children in modern society are ‘sited, insulated and distanced’, their identities increasingly aligned to pre-specified places, routines and activities. Drawing on research into the everyday lives of children, this study considered the time and space provided to children to play outdoors in early childhood education and care settings, and what this signified in terms of what was considered ‘good’ in and for an Irish childhood. Three discourses were highlighted to include: a discourse of freedom and spontaneity in childhood, of ‘naturalness’ and sensorially rich experiences in childhood and of safety in childhood. The analysis revealed competing tensions in interviewee’s narratives about the outdoors, however, which was constructed simultaneously as a space of freedom, discovery and risk. The former was spoken of in terms of spontaneity and freedom to explore, the latter in terms of concerns related to traffic, ‘stranger danger’ and fear of litigation in the event of personal injury. In an increasingly risk averse society, especially with respect to children, this construction and experience of the outdoors in oppositional terms, through a discourse of autonomy/freedom versus one of protection/safety has given rise at best to the marginalisation of the outdoors from the experiences of many children in early years services and the ensuing invisibility of children in outdoor spaces.

These patterns are underpinned by inter-generational dynamics of power and control, children’s everyday lives conditioned not only by adult assumptions regarding their competency and need for protection from ‘risk’ but also by the priorities adults define in terms of serving the ‘best interests of the child’. The predominance of a protective discourse eschews an emphasis on spontaneity, playfulness and risk in favour of learning which takes place in a more controlled format indoors. This ‘adult comfort zone’ of regulated activity indoors, coupled with the noted resistance of adult interviewees to the ‘damp Irish weather’ outdoors, ensures that the outdoors is constructed as an additive extra rather than core to the everyday experiences of children in Irish early childhood education settings (Bennett, 2005). The implications for processes of identity formation are clear as the disciplinary technologies (Foucault, 1979) of institutionalised settings corral children into certain types of learning, underplaying the freer and more inter-dependent dynamics of peer and adult/child relations that can occur in the outdoor environment. That there was wide acknowledgement by interviewees of children’s preference to play outdoors also suggests that children’s views are not in practice being incorporated into the organisation of time and space in early childhood education and care settings. Furthermore, the absence of significant investment by the state
in the early year sector, during a period of sustained economic development, must also be considered in terms of young children’s relative invisibility and highlighted as a significant barrier to the provision of enriching outdoor play opportunities for them in early years settings.

The research points to the need to raise general awareness regarding children’s right to play outdoors, as well as its potential in supporting children’s well-being, learning and development. This necessitates the ‘adult’ world connecting with children’s interests, and learning strategies, the promotion and actualisation of good design in institutionalised spaces for children and addressing the current imbalance between indoors and outdoors in training, practice, policy development and research. A useful starting point is to raise awareness amongst the range of adult stakeholders to engage with the ‘newness’ of early childhood experiences, the capacity to explore and the significance of the sensory and movement experience to children in their response to their surrounding physical environment. A second approach is to pay attention to observing how young children use the outdoor environment, how they perceive and engage with it and listen to children regarding the value and meaning they put on their play experiences outdoors. An inter-disciplinary approach to training, support and mentoring of early years practitioner’s is required to improve pedagogical work in the outdoors, along with design of early childhood education and care settings that allows access to garden like spaces that invites children’s interaction across a range of dimensions. Further, dominant perceptions of the ‘bad’ weather needs to be challenged with the assumption that children and adults in Ireland can access the outdoors on a daily basis all year round. Ultimately, however, the increasing institutionalising of children’s spaces means that without a concerted effort on the part of committed and motivated early years practitioners, children are ‘being confined within’, the outdoors increasingly marginalised in the experiences of their everyday lives.

Notes

1 This represents a diverse range of setting types, philosophical orientations and practices encompassing pre-school playgroups, naíonraí (pre-schools through the medium of the Irish language), Montessori schools, crèches, day nurseries and childminding services. Up to the implementation of the ChildCare (Preschool Services) Regulations in 1997, this sector of early childhood education and care provision was unregulated.

2 Provision of early childhood education within primary schools is universal, free and highly regulated through national guidelines laid down in the Revised Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Inspection practices are centrally administered through Department of Education and Science. All children in the Ireland are entitled to attend primary school from the age of four, with approximately 50% of the entry cohort to formal primary schooling being of this age.

3 The use of the all-encompassing term early childhood education care in this study reflects this new policy development. It is also in line with the terminology used by the OECD (2006) to describe services for young children.

4 The research reported on here is part of a larger study of the experiences of the outdoors in early childhood education and care settings in urban settings in the Ireland.

5 The perspective taken here is one of critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

These included the parents of the children (seven mothers, three fathers), the eight early years practitioners who worked directly with these children, the four managers/principals of each of the four fieldwork settings and a local playgroup co-ordinator. Interviews were also conducted with policy officers in the State Department of Education and Science, Primary Teacher Union, and trainers in seven early childhood education and care training organisations.

Piloting of significant aspects of the fieldwork methodology was conducted in early childhood education and care settings in the Netherlands providing a useful cultural comparative point in evaluating outdoor provision in early childhood education and care in Ireland. The location of the pilot study in the Netherlands was largely opportunist since the researcher had moved to the Netherlands the year following the commencement of the study.

This became apparent in the observation of the low boundaries, open fences, attractive signage, and aesthetically appealing and diverse physical features of the outdoor environments of the early childhood education and care settings in cities and towns in the Netherlands. These seemed to signal the early childhood education and care settings as spaces where children were welcome and their visibility as a valued component of the community. The invisibility of children behind high boundary walls and opaque doors and sometimes barred windows in the four early childhood education and care settings in Dublin appeared to communicate an opposing construction of childhood.

This is also noted in pedagogical handbooks such as the High/Scope Curriculum where children’s large body movements are described as ‘an undeniable part of their youthful nature ... Expecting young children not to move is like expecting them not to breathe’ (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002).

A number of early years practitioner’s commented on visits of health and safety inspectors including one who was reported as saying: ‘would you not put fencing around the tree to stop the kids climbing?’ (Martha, early years practitioner, Hilltop community playgroup).

References


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