

Retreat: How do children use this as a tool for catharsis?

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Introduction

Children's play in the outdoors is often characterised as physically active; a place to be loud, boisterous and exploratory. This is often reiterated to children by teachers who dictate children 'use their inside voice', 'walking feet inside', 'you need to go outside to burn off some energy'. These phrases indicate that quiet, calm, relaxing spaces are for indoors and running around wildly, yelling and engaging in physically active play is reserved solely for outdoor play. This study explored the notion that the outdoors can be a place of rest, rejuvenation and emotional 'tank filling'.

Research Questions

This study aimed at answering questions about children's retreat play in the outdoors;

- What is a retreat space?
- What is the role of retreat spaces in children's outdoor play?
- How do teachers value children's play in retreat spaces in the outdoors?

Research method

Intrinsic Case Study – an in-depth exploration of the uniqueness of one setting

Data collection tools – photographs and written running commentary

Thematic analysis – reviewing data with specific categories in mind;

1. Which spaces were inhabited most frequently by children
2. Features of the outdoor spaces
3. Peer interactions
4. Teacher involvement

Role of the researcher

My own role was that of 'open observer', to observe and capture patterns in children's play but also to engage with them as they saw fit. During my observations children did engage with me and asked me what I was doing, I felt it important to explain my presence and the purpose to those that showed an interest. This was one way of respecting that children owned this space and I was a visitor needing to explain my intentions. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry (2009) relay the importance of transparency and a relationship built on trust and respect.

Affordances

Originally based on Gibson's theory of affordances Heft believes "children's outdoor environment affords different types of play and that children perceive the functions of the environment as invitations for certain activities" (Sandseter, 2009, p. 439).

In this project the affordance of retreat space was provided for children within the environment but the children did not choose to use the space in such a way.

The Centre Environment



Titman's (1994) study into the outdoors indicates that idyllic spaces for children are those that had elements of the natural world, both landscapes and living things, "colour diversity and change, features that can be used for seating/shelter, private spaces and materials that can be changes or used in an imaginative way" (as cited in Waters & Maynard, 2010, p.478).

Children's perceptions of retreat



The swings are in one far corner of the playground while the bike track loops around the under twos playground out of sight.



Examining the children's perception of retreat spaces in the outdoors showed the spaces that children enjoyed and gravitated to were often not those that were removed from view. What was evident was the use of the spaces that were geographically situated at the four corners of the playground. There were spaces that children spent extended solitary periods of time. This was often in or on structures, the sandpit, bikes and swings seemed to be favourite spaces.

Blanchet-Cohen and Elliot (2011) also found "swings were used in a solitary manner as a place for dreaming and reflection or as a test of skill" (p. 768). Greenfield's (2012) research concurs with the importance of the swings and sandpit as retreat spaces for children.

Perhaps this was felt by teachers too as they were often spaces that the teachers did not encroach on.

However, there was a distinct contrast between the adult created 'obvious' hidden or retreat spaces and the way children retreated in practice. It appears that withdrawal or retreat spaces must be created and identified by children.

Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005) sum up well the difference between the child's and adult's perspective of spaces simply stating children "have no concept of what the space is designed for – its utilitarian use – and they do not care" (p. 167).

Children's retreat strategies in play

Play was a cathartic event where children created space or retreated in action rather than in a particular area, the strategy of moving around frequently alone or with peers was evident in allowing them to be alone became evident.



Playing with a companion



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Moving between spaces to protect the small group



Photo 1



Photo 2

C. spent much alone time in the one space humming to himself, talking and singing. This was his time for restful peaceful play, exploring and making meaning of concepts new and familiar to him (photo 1). A group of boys spends much time with the rotation table, investigating the handle and what will happen with various objects they chose to place on the conveyer belt (photo 2).

Interestingly, there were multiple occasions where teachers or other children approached children to interact and they almost instantly moved away. Skanfors, Lofdahl and Hagglund (2009) found similar occurrences in their research on withdrawal. What they propose is this is children's way of withdrawing by constantly moving to protect their small group of participants – the space itself was inconsequential but the ability to move was a withdrawal strategy in its own right

Children as agents in their own play

The play that children engaged in within the outdoors illuminated children as agents and constructors of their own play and learning regardless of how the teachers had set up the space.

There was an observed tension between the outdoors being a space for free play and the desire for children to engage with teachers in a meaningful way. There were occasions when children actively sought the attention of teachers and others where they purposely disengaged themselves with teachers.

N. purposefully seeks out teacher Y.S. to share with her the picture she has created that shows teacher E. travels in a map. Once Y.S. had acknowledged and discussed N. picture with her N. placed her picture away and happily engaged in play on the swings outside with friends.



A teacher approached M. and C. who appear to be close friends on the fort balcony, the teacher sits next to M. and shows her that her shoelace is undone and proceeds to retie it for her. This completed the girls immediately move away together. There was no dialogue between the friends but clearly an understanding they wished to be 'alone', it did not appear to matter where that happened just that they did not want others involved in what they were doing together.



Reconceptualising the teachers role

There appeared to be an unspoken role of the teacher where often they acted as facilitators of the outdoor environment – it was clear the environment had been set up in an inviting way to give children spaces to play and the use of separating and signalling individual areas within the larger space appeared to be a priority for the teachers. For this centre it is evident there is an approach to utilising the environment as a third teacher. However that role involves more than refreshing, setting up and movement of resources.

Fleer (2010) suggests “early childhood teachers need to reclaim their professional expertise as active agents in children’s learning, and not be seen as passive providers of materials to foster developmental milestones, where the latter role not only de-emphasizes their place in children’s learning” (p.41).

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In summation....

Children's use and perception of the outdoor space for retreat purposes indicate that they do not necessarily seek hidden spaces for retreating but can do this in any area of the environment. Often retreating meant being alone or with one or two chosen friends. The retreat space was not dictated by physical boundaries as such but by how the children used it and who was present. It was clear that children have a desire to lead their play in the outdoors but also seek meaningful adult interaction. The key appears to be in the balance of freedom/retreat and teacher engagement.

Implications

- From this research project the tension between free play and the role of the teacher in children's outdoor play could be further investigated. Interviews with teachers could have highlighted their own personal views and how this links to their own practice. The effect of these views on children's play could add further weight to the positive or negative beliefs around the role of retreat spaces in children's outdoor play.
- An investigation into the retreat spaces for children under two would be a direction for further research. This could highlight further the importance of outdoor play not just for older children but for infants and toddlers also. Do infants and toddlers engage in retreat play using similar withdrawal strategies that older children have utilised in this study?

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