



Peaceful Schools Guidance Leaflet

School Grounds

for Peaceful Learning and Play

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Date: 14 October 2014

Guidance Leaflet number 3

SPIRITUAL^uEngland



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About the author

Felicity Robinson MA, CMLI * is a landscape architect, trainer, educator and author. She is an expert in outdoor learning and play. In writing this guidance for the Peaceful Schools Movement, Felicity has drawn on twenty five years experience working with all kinds of schools throughout the country.

Felicity is passionate about helping schools get maximum value from their school grounds/outdoor environments for their pupils' peaceful learning and play. She works with pupils and students of all ages and abilities, with school staff, parents and others to help them work together and become actively engaged in making changes to the use, design and management of their school grounds and play spaces. She has worked on a range of projects, from very small areas through to very big multi-site schemes.

In recent years Felicity has been a 'scientist in residence' in schools, team teaching and supporting the science curriculum from Nursery to Year 6. This experience also feeds into her design and grounds development role, where she is passionate about engaging children in constructing their play and learning spaces through active hands-on projects.

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1. Introduction

My work in primary and secondary schools is fascinating. A site walkabout and observation of break-times always give me a real insight into the social life of the pupils in that school. I am particularly interested in the way in which children are influenced by the environment they are in. This is very relevant to the 'peaceful school' concept. I believe that the environment has a significant influence on children's behaviour and learning which might be positive or negative. This has formed an action research project for me over the years, with the University of London.

By applying the principles of design and spatial analysis usually used for neighbourhood planning to school grounds, it is possible to have a positive impact on the way the spaces work and how they feel to the children and staff. Sadly, there are all too many new-build and refurbished or extended schools where this approach was not undertaken in the planning stages. If it had been, then it could have influenced design decisions that, at no extra cost, could have had a positive effect on site dynamics, functionality, play and learning.

2. Rationale and evidence

Play initiatives lead to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for children and are also linked to a range of other developmental benefits. There is clear research evidence that constructive break-time interventions deliver positive benefits in terms of children's physical and mental health, cognitive and social skills. What is more, recent research also shows the importance of access to the natural world in children's play and learning, yet many school grounds are still largely sterile environments.

In schools, the essential characteristics for play include:

- (i) outdoor space with features (including natural features) that encourage play;
- (ii) a reasonable period of time for play;
- (iii) other children with whom to play;
- (iv) an atmosphere and ethos that permits active play.

If these four key factors of space, time, other children and a supportive adult attitude are in place, then it is reasonable to expect that health and developmental benefits will result, (ref: 'The Play Return: a review of the wider

impact of play initiatives', by Tim Gill, June 2014, commissioned by the Children's Play Policy Forum). Taken as a whole, research findings make a strong case for a more sustained focus on what is arguably a neglected and undervalued time in children's lives.

Ofsted wholeheartedly supports learning outside the classroom and states that it can improve the quality of teaching and engagement in learning across all areas of the curriculum. Robin Hammerton, an Ofsted HMI said: 'Learning outside the classroom has positive benefits for all groups of young people including those underachieving or not sufficiently motivated by mainstream provision'.

To conclude - there is convincing evidence that the quality of school grounds has a significant, positive impact on children's learning and wellbeing.

3. Site Audit

The starting point for making improvements/changes, should be to ask the following questions:

- Where are the calm, peaceful places and the open boisterous places?
- Are there enough places of different character, including access to the natural world?
- What needs are not being met?
- Where are the 'trouble spots' and how can these be re-imagined as positive spaces and places?
- How do surveillance and supervision (*two very different concepts, by the way!*) and the attitude of supporting adults, influence site dynamics?
- What is the school ethos and policy around play and outdoor learning?

'Place-making' and meeting the many and varying needs of pupils for learning, socialising, sport and play, as well as the needs that staff have for teaching, is the key to success. I strongly believe that 'play' is still important at secondary level too.

Site 'auditors'/observers need to consider the social, emotional and physical needs of pupils as well as the curriculum requirements for sport and other subjects.

4. Observation

The pupils at any school are the site experts. It is in observing them, and talking to them, that you can get 'under the skin' of the site and its characteristics.

There are many aspects of the school grounds that should be audited to get a full picture of how well the grounds are meeting needs. For example, much

can be learnt from how a site is 'colonised' when the pupils come out for break. Look out for the key routes around the site, the nodes and congestion points as well as the places where people congregate and what they do in these congregations.

You can also spot the students or activities that are marginalised by other activities (often ball games) or by site design that has not taken their needs into account.

Areas of damage, accidental or otherwise, also very often tell a site design story too. Another key indicator is to look at whether there are parts of the site that give the pupils/students an opportunity to manipulate their environment in a positive way, to suit their needs. The versatility of spaces for learning as well as for socialising is very important to the functionality and 'peacefulness' of the grounds.

5. Engagement

Consultation is different from engagement. I feel that consultation is largely passive and engagement is more active, so wherever possible I recommend that the whole school community is engaged in the process of identifying issues, generating ideas and finding solutions.

An essential component of any school grounds assessment is to have conversations with pupils and staff about their current experiences of the grounds, and their aspirations for the future of the school. This is an opportunity to engage pupils in 'real world' learning; they can be involved as researchers, surveyors, problem-solvers and designers. They can get engaged in construction too - from laying paving to wood carving and planting. Children of any age can get involved in these activities.

Site redesign projects need to be carefully tailored to each school, the age of the pupils and to specific curriculum needs or outcomes related to work and careers (for the older students). Expert assistance will be invaluable to make the project happen.

Workshops for staff and pupils facilitated by specialist consultants can help in the development of the project. Any school grounds development project, small or large, is a great opportunity for children and young people to make a positive contribution to their school and to feel pride in a tangible achievement (see Case Study 1 in the box at the end).

6. Design for peaceful learning and play

I am firmly of the opinion that schools are much more likely to be peaceful places if the outdoor environment is designed to promote positive behaviour and to meet the wide-ranging needs of everyone to have a rich learning environment, places of quiet, calm and reflection as well as places for

boisterous, loud and busy activities (see Case Study 2, in the box at the end).

Many teachers like to make use of the school grounds as a learning resource on a regular basis, but often find that the practicalities frustrate their ambitions. In Early Years settings, the culture and curriculum strongly support outdoor learning and many schools aim to take elements of this forward into KS1, KS2 and further.

The teaching and learning function of school grounds should be a key design consideration. It is important to develop a strong brief though the participation of all 'stakeholders' (pupils, teachers and other school staff, parents and members of the local community) as well as drawing on expert advice and support. Involving teaching staff in generating a shared vision is a key to success. It is worth noting that several Head Teachers have found that the engagement process itself can be very useful CPD for their staff.

I would recommend looking at what other schools have done before embarking on your own school grounds improvement project. There are a lot of good examples and inspirational models to learn from. The sources of further information below can also help and inspire you to view your outdoor learning and play environment with fresh eyes.

I believe that 'peaceful schools' will have a successful combination of positive relationships **and** positive environments for teaching, learning, play and life skills development.

7. Sources of further information and support

Landscapes Naturally (Felicity Robinson) - supports schools to transform outdoor learning and play and promotes education through engagement in grounds development projects at small and large scale. <http://www.landscapesnaturally.co.uk/>

Learning through Landscapes - helps children to connect with nature, become more active, learn outdoors, develop social skills and have fun. <http://www.ltl.org.uk/>

Council for Learning Outside the Classroom - is the national voice for learning outside the classroom. <http://www.lotc.org.uk/>

Project Wild Thing – is a film-led movement to get more children (and their parents/carers) outside and reconnecting with nature. <http://projectwildthing.com>

Case Study 1 - Tailored Engagement Projects

Imaginative design and careful juxtaposition of activities, together with pupils having physically invested something of themselves in any new developments, is at the heart of good external design.

School grounds development, whatever the scale, is an opportunity for real world learning. These projects are tailored to the specific needs of the school and the pupils. Some projects are part of a major capital programme for the grounds at a school, some are smaller one-off projects, but all aim to engage students and the school community in making positive changes to their grounds.

Here are just a few examples:

DT (all ages) – Pupils focus on a design problem in the school grounds, develop solutions and get involved in implementation (budget permitting) This is a very practical and very versatile project. Students get to grips with developing and responding to a design brief then creating and presenting design solutions. The project also gives older students an insight into the professional worlds of landscape architecture and architecture.

KS2/KS3 - Psychology, PSHE, mapping, data handling – Pupils carry out a grounds assessment and/or consultation survey of staff and students looking at the grounds in terms of feelings, personal safety, etc. This can be very revealing. Students find out about an intriguing aspect of landscape architecture, planning, built environment professions and aspects of criminology too.

Maths (all ages) - A practical surveying and plan-drawing task for a specific intervention, then specification and costing the materials for a small hard landscape project (paving or walling for example) preferably linked to a real project that will be delivered onsite. Older students learn about jobs in landscape architecture, construction, quantity surveying, engineering etc. The youngest children work on age appropriate real tasks, talk to the builders, and role play based on their experiences.

Science (all ages) - There are so many ways that science can be brought to life through these projects, from investigation of the properties of materials, fire and plant identification at KS1 and KS2, to habitat mapping, use of GIS and quadrat sampling at secondary level. Older students learn about potential careers in ecology, surveying, landscape design and landscape management, and younger pupils learn to work scientifically.

Art (all ages) - There is a huge variety of possibilities to create an external collaborative artwork for the grounds depending on school circumstances and priorities. Students explore a range of suitable resistant and malleable materials, including land art, living materials, wood carving, banner making etc. This is a very flexible opportunity and gives them an insight into an aspect of the jobs of a landscape architect, sculptor, ecologist, land artist etc.

Examples of projects delivered by Landscapes Naturally.

Case Study 2 - Fulham Primary School with Landscapes Naturally

This case study describes the positive impact of a relatively small intervention in the creation of a more 'peaceful' Early Years and KS1 environment for outdoor learning and play. It illustrates the value of a well-designed internal boundary, which had a low cost / high impact influence on the dynamics of the outdoor learning environment and the wellbeing of the children within it.

The EYFS outdoor environment was unstructured, and children who were overwhelmed by frenetic activity felt uncomfortable. Several children with ASD use this space. Physical play was well provided for, and there were a number of wheeled toys that were much enjoyed but had a negative impact on quieter play and construction activities when the riders 'mow down' the careful constructions!

The existing boundaries were unimaginative, used to line up pots for planting vegetables, with some linear benches and applied wall features. Compounding the problems was a route through this site to a garden area used by the whole school.

After careful observation of play, and in discussion with staff and children, a new 'fence' was planned and then tested experimentally for a few days. After minor adjustments to the route, the details were planned equally carefully. This was to be more than just a fence. It was to be an opportunity to make places or zones where different activities could take place. This required the fence NOT to follow straight lines but to meander, purposefully, around exciting features. Within one of these meanders the fence became an art workshop for example, where the children paint on a variety of substrates (including a large fallen tree branch that was tied up one day!). Other places created included a big sand pit and a planted mini-beast hunting zone.

The impact of this was immediate. Physical play and ride-on toys now have their own space, and the new quieter area support new engaging activities uninterrupted by faster physical play. The long-term benefits to the children are evident as the place is now more communication friendly, and the staff set up a wider variety of activity in clearly defined zones.

Children who had previously found the outdoor space challenging now find that they have a transitional place where they can investigate the natural world, take part in group or focus activity and from which they can observe the more physical play, and join in when they feel ready.

The innovation here is that the 'fence' was perceived as a lot more than just a boundary or barrier. The design was very carefully planned to achieve multiple aims. Staff development is now underway to maximise the benefits.

Staff evaluative quotes:

'Children can choose to retreat to the quieter zone when they feel the need to.'

'I observed a child with speech and language delay who was busily engaged in building his own 'fence' after watching the builders.'

'The new design has made a significant impact on the quality of activity in both zones.'

'The quieter activities are not disrupted now by bikes and fast play. The children are more engrossed in group work without disturbance.'

'We have the opportunity now to link creative activities to topics and to deliver them outdoors.'