Space, Schools and the Younger Child

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ABSTRACT This article first appeared in *FORUM*, Volume 46, Number 1, 2004, pp.19-23, and appears now as a tribute to the late Annabelle Dixon. In this article Annabelle looks at the nature, potential and changing character of the spaces provided for younger children in present day schools from the viewpoint of an Early Years teacher. In typically elegant and insightful fashion she asks, 'Do we, should we, give enough consideration to those spaces required by the development of their imagination, for instance?' before going on to explore the issue of space in all its interpersonal, geographical and curricular richness.

That young children need space seems an unsurprising statement. So unsurprising that it scarcely needs further examination, to say nothing of further thought. But what do we really mean by 'space' when considered in the context of young children in school and their developing needs? Various studies have mostly described the actual physical spaces available and organised for children and frequently refer to their relevance in understanding power structures within schools. However, not many seem to have emphasised the actual nature of the different kinds of 'spaces' that children need, inhabit and experience in their school lives.

What does it mean for young children to experience a variety of social and personal spaces within a school context, and is it important enough for us to take into account when planning and providing for an appropriate school environment? Do we, should we, give enough consideration to those spaces required by the developing imagination, for instance?

I would like to argue that if we understood more about the different characteristics and potential of these spaces, not only would we provide more appropriate schooling, it might also help us to interpret children's responses and behaviours in a much more insightful way. As adults we have forgotten, and therefore fail to recognise, what it is to learn how to negotiate the nature of the differing spaces that make up the frequently puzzling and sometimes threatening, social and physical world of school for young children.

The Provision of Physical Space

Children's self-evident need for movement and their physical development have played an influential part in the way we think about 'space' in the context of education for younger children. Thus the provision of large physical spaces has probably had an effect on the way we mostly consider young children in this respect and it is worth examining how schools generally provide for what they see as a predominantly physical need. Exuberance and energy are recognised as being an abiding characteristic of childhood and the images go from young children charging around on their trikes in a nursery playground to older children determinedly caught up trying to play football in a crowded urban playground.

In schools' provision of appropriate space and places for such activities, children are learning the extent to which their needs are being met or otherwise by an adult world. From the time of early educators such as Froebel and Margaret McMillan it was recognised that the younger children needed to experience themselves in a larger, more physical space than that provided by the end stops of four internal walls; a need which the pioneering Forest or Outdoor School movement continues to recognise as one of major importance. To observe young children in such settings is indeed a provocative challenge to those that see playgrounds for young children as being necessarily neat, sanitised and totally predictable. For older children the provision of a simple outdoor tarmac space was long deemed sufficient until, to the credit of many primary schools, its deficiencies became apparent and they began to recognise it as a social as well as a physical space and one that therefore needed restructuring. Often aided by local advisers and various charities with experience and expertise in this field, playgrounds have become the setting for different kinds of physical activity from climbing to running to playing games that need equipment to having painted surface markings like hopscotch or wall targets. Charging about has become less of an option as different opportunities for using the space have been presented to children. The playground has often become physically transformed as well, with walls painted with cheerful murals and benches, 'friendship seats' and small gardens or arbours being established to cater for the perennial need for the quieter children, for which often read girls. ('Miss, girls don't like playing big games; they only like playing little games' (Barnett, 1988)). Even so, while such places undoubtedly offer a physical haven for youngsters who are scared or tired of being pushed about by their more energetic fellows, it would be naïve to see them as places that might diminish the frequency of the more subtle forms of verbal bullying.

Playground space, however designed, is very often the place where social hierarchies are still determined. Children who are asked to indicate on a school map where bullying takes place will frequently mark such places in a playground (besides the predictable toilets) Hampton (2000). Schools, and indeed pupils therefore find themselves in a dilemma: the schools want to, indeed are required to, reduce bullying, which they know happens to a large extent at playtimes and as pupils want to avoid being bullied, so an increasing

rejection of the playground is coming about – and consequently the opportunity to experience themselves and others physically in a large space.

Diane Rich (2003) points out that children's lives are increasingly highly timetabled and structured and quotes a seven year old child as saying there wasn't much time for play in his world; at school, even if you managed to get out at morning break there was always the chance you might have to stay in to finish your work and the lunch break was usually taken up by eating lunch and going to different clubs on different days of the week. So for him and very probably for a great many others, the reality is that this experience of using the large playground space is being increasingly curtailed. The opportunities for learning how you join or even leave a group, knowing how to watch others (and the critical distances involved) to simply walking about without any one telling you what to do and how to do it, become diminished.

All experiences help build up an image of the 'self-in-space' and the 'self-in-relation-to-others-in-space'. Not important? Apart from daily negotiations in work and smaller family groups, millions of people commute daily in and out of cities, frequently in crowds, and equal millions attend sports and community events. Knowing how to behave in such environments is a crucial social skill and school playgrounds represent the space where children learn to cope with unpredictable movement and free flowing group behaviour as well as giving them an opportunity for physical exercise.

The Indoor Space

But children can surely learn these personal and physical skills in the large indoor space provided by the school hall? That these things are indeed there to be learnt is revealed by watching the response of reception class children on the first occasion they come into an empty school hall: some stay by the walls, cluster together and generally seem rather fazed by the experience. Others appear to be instantly stimulated and cannon around the space becoming very over-excited in the process. These responses certainly tell us something about the individuals concerned but it should also remind us that all the children have something to learn about this kind of space. One of the commonest, and most bewildering, instructions a teacher can give a reception age child is to say 'run and find a space'. What is this invisible thing called space that it can be run after and found? It is only too easy to make assumptions about young children's real level of understanding.

How they learn about this kind of space and the maximising of the opportunities presented by it depends on a number of possibilities. With the current emphasis on the acquisition of discrete motor skills, once considered correctly, to be mainly the province of KS2, children now have considerably less chance to genuinely explore and discover space in relation to themselves and others. Far from being just an alternative option, a number of writers, for example Zaichowsky,(1980) have considered that it is only through largely independent movements that children 'learn to employ cognitive strategies and

understand themselves in psychological terms and how to interact with other children'. Damasio (2000) maintains that 'the entire construction of knowledge, from simple to complex… depends on the ability to map what happens over time, *inside* our organisms, *around* our organisms (and) *to* and *with* our organisms…' Importantly, it is a place for intellectual discovery and learning as well as the physical and one whose potential is considerably lessened by the current emphasis on predetermined, teacher-led activities and decisions.

Experiencing Space

Far sighted PE educators from the 1960s to the 1980s recognised the need to build up a child's construct of space before starting on ways in which their knowledge might later be used. The exploration of this particular space was usually carried out by finding out, for instance, what part of your body were you using? Did speed or direction make a difference? How and when and where did you have to take account of others using this same space? The present day KS1 PE curriculum, allows for little of this kind of exciting and worthwhile exploration. Similarly, the Laban dance movement which came in to schools about the same time, also aimed to promote children's awareness of space and their place in it by its unique exploration of the personal dimensions of space surrounding each individual child, before moving on to explore the common space also inhabited by others. Terming it the 'kinesphere', Laban saw it as 'the personal space surrounding a child's body and (secondly) the general space which is beyond personal space and bounded by the particular confines in which any of the children's activity takes place'.

To those who use Laban-based teaching, a whole vocabulary of position in space – behind, in front, beside, below etc. besides different kinds of speeds, direction and quality of movement is gradually built up. If children hop it is because they want to extend another movement to see if they can, or they feel it suits some music they are listening to. They are personally involved in exploring and making decisions and in making an individual response to music. They are not hopping because someone has told the whole class to 'hop like a bunny'. As young children like any kind of movement and also pleasing their teachers, this latter kind of activity is usually carried out with misleading gusto but as Keiran Egan (1988) points out in his book 'Primary Understanding', like much of our contemporary curriculum for young children, it is flawed, shallow and deeply unserious. The potential of this space, even for the physical development of children, is now also considerably diminished.

Designated Spaces

Other kinds of physical spaces also obviously present themselves to young children on entry to school; spaces that are not provided to meet their physical needs or development but by and large designed to meet perceived pedagogical needs. Studies over the years have described the design and use of such spaces

in primary schools and for the most part they are spaces that tell children a great deal about adult expectations and power structures. As Eva Alerby (2002) pointed out in a paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (Lisbon) school spaces, whatever the age group, can create both expectations and/or limitations and there are particular characteristics to these spaces. We have yet to really understand, on examination, what this might mean in the context of the Foundation stage and KS1. What young children could be learning, for example, from the space and place where the teacher sits, to where the children themselves sit for most of the day, to who is allowed to use the pencil sharpener or collect books. All represent the beginning of a particular kind of social knowledge situated in a particular space. What Jane McGregor (2002) calls 'the relationship between the social and material', the 'network space of relations and objects'.

An example of this came my way when a new child entered my reception class halfway through a school term. He had already been at another school for two terms and had evidently built up certain expectations. Expectations that at the end of the first morning session clearly were not being met. 'I don't get it', he complained, 'I can't see it'. It transpired that his puzzlement was to do with the absence of what he thought he had learnt was an obligatory feature of all classrooms. The existence (and whereabouts) of 'The Naughty Boys' Table'. I could see only too clearly it was the company he preferred to keep and it took him some time to orient to an alternative reality and overcome his disappointment.

While such a table may not be in many classrooms, other 'tables' most certainly are, and are quickly located by the children. Placing children at particular tables is the way in which many early years and KS1 teachers keep to the obligations of grouping their children by ability (required most particularly by the NLS) 'Apples' 'Bananas' 'Pears' and the inevitable 'Lemons'; 'Foxes' 'Moles' 'Badgers' – and the luckless 'Hedgehogs' are all real examples of such 'tables' which have a spatial and social reality within the geography of the average KS1 class. Your place on what ever table is chosen for you soon brings with it a rapid understanding of the educational hierarchy. As one five year old commented 'once an Hedgehog *always* an Hedgehog' …. Acknowledgement of educational trajectory is thus added early on to the social-spatial reality and dimensions of their classroom lives.

Other Spaces, Other Realities

Something young children quickly learn nowadays about their classrooms is that it is clearly not the place in which lively or indeed any physical activity is welcomed. Such behaviour is for elsewhere. The more we have turned towards 'playing at schools' as the template for the educational experience of young KS1 and Foundation Stage children, the further away have we moved from observing and supporting young children's real needs. What is it that has made us think there is a special clock inside children that will conveniently turn itself

on and off when it comes to this need for movement? The provision of a large outside playground and school hall have already been touched on but these are for very circumscribed times. With an increasing likelihood of shorter playtimes, the statistics show that young children now have less PE than ever before. This is due, we are told, to the increasing pressures of SATs, league tables, Ofsted etc. Even by 1997 though, Armstrong and Welsman were able to state that children in the United Kingdom already received fewer hours of physical education than any other comparable country in Europe. There is also the practical matter that nowadays in most primary schools, owing to the pressure to 'do' the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in the mornings, school halls are virtually unused until the afternoons, thus creating a new and unnecessary timetabling bottleneck.

It is not surprising if children then use the only space that is available to them, their classroom, whatever the social sanctions. Social sanctions that, interestingly, they have quickly come to learn, but sometimes even to the children's own bafflement, they find themselves overriding. It seems no coincidence that as opportunities for physical activity go down, so time and expenditure on 'behaviour management' go up. Evidence of restlessness, inattention, boisterousness and irritability are often clues to the experienced early years teacher that her class isn't manifesting anything other than the need, colloquially expressed, 'to let off steam' rather than undesirable personality traits that need expensive 'management'. An inexpensive but spontaneous, ie. untimetabled, additional playground P.E. session, can often work wonders. The reason it isn't resorted to so often at present is due to that crippling word 'timetable' and the influences already mentioned that are making such timetables over-cautious and inflexible.

The Need for Different Spaces

Experienced and perhaps one should say enlightened, Early Years teachers then, know their children's needs. Importantly, not only do they know the kind of spatial and material provision that young children require for their physical development, they also recognise that the hall and playground offer but one kind of space and that there is much blurring of the edges when it comes to making a division between social, intellectual and physical needs, and the kind of spaces that are required to meet them. The Italian early years schools of Reggio Emilia show their profound understanding of these needs by the way they arrange the materials and spaces for their children and remind us of the kinds of spaces that were once found more frequently in Britain in schools and classes for younger children. Fortunately they are still found in a fair number of nursery schools but their provision cannot be taken for granted.

Moving away from the historically large single physical space of the original infants' classroom to the provision inside the classroom of smaller spaces is or was the most notable characteristic of the changes that could be observed as far back as the l940's in Britain. There is one comparatively large

space, for example a class book corner or story carpet where children know that together they will be introduced by adults to new skills, new information, new interests and the new worlds contained in books and poetry. There are also, if they are fortunate and the likelihood is rapidly decreasing, smaller spaces where children can be other than themselves, for example engaging with puppets, large bricks, drama corners, story boxes, dressing up etc. Additional spaces where children can muse and observe, for example upon the humble worm as a creature of amazement. Spaces where the material offers intellectual challenge, for instance the provision of mathematical and scientific games and puzzles, and other spaces where something new can be created where nothing was before, e.g. in wood, clay, paint, fabric, etc. All spaces where, to use Eleanor Duckworth's (1974) memorable phrase, can be had the 'having of wonderful ideas'. At the same time such spaces are not usually available to the single child and often have to be shared. The hard work, work that is hard enough for adults, let alone children, of 'working alongside others, sharing, negotiating, tolerating, empathising with and respecting others' (Rich, 2003) has to be undertaken in most of these spaces.

Present Day Changes

The fact that Diane Rich sees the above 'hard work' as characteristics of play, should make us re-consider what we now appear to have jettisoned. Where now are these spaces in most present day KS1 classrooms where children can learn such essentials? Where can they experiment, ponder, and engage at depth intellectually and emotionally with the world at their own pace and level? An analysis of such classrooms nowadays usually shows us three basic spaces; the larger classroom where children sit around tables and can if necessary see the black/white board and the teacher's space where children can sit together on a carpet facing the teacher with yet another (smaller) version of a black/white board. There may well be other areas around the edge of the room eg. a home corner, modelling and art materials etc but these will now be considered as recreational areas not spaces where intellectual and social learning are paramount. We are fast going back to the educational space of the feeder and the fed facing each other in a pre-ordained and unchanging physical arrangement, but frequently the carpeted floor and the bright modern equipment deceive us only too quickly into judging it as a modern and forward looking space.

A Space Beyond

In either case though, there is a need for one other very important kind of space and one, which by its very invisibility, is only too easy to overlook. It is increasingly recognised and discussed as an adult need but far less frequently as one that children too might share. It is a use of the word 'space' that paradoxically also involves time; 'Give me space', 'I need space', 'my personal

space' etc. are phrases that do not necessarily refer to anything with physical dimensions but to a time when the incessant pressures of domestic life and work become overwhelming and withdrawal is felt to be crucial for future mental and emotional well being. A time when one can freewheel, relax, daydream, even mooch about.

Shouldn't we recognise that young children also have this need? The 'play' that Diane Rich describes is hard work. A diet of repetitive formal instruction is hard work in a different sense. In either case children will need or look for their own personal space. In some instances this may manifest itself in the way that comes close to the adult meaning of needing withdrawal. For example, an acquaintance described how one unhappy child in her class used to go into the space behind the radiator whenever he felt stressed and a refugee child in my own class set up her place inside a large cardboard box under a paint table until and when she felt safe enough to come out of it. Other kinds of withdrawal are less obvious to the adult eye but children retreat to these personal and often secret inner spaces when there is a need to; alternative worlds are possible in such spaces and comfort is to be taken by the isolated and frightened and excitement by the bored and fretful.

Poets still remain one of our best links to the worlds and needs of children and lines from Eleanor Farjeon's poem 'The Distance' (written about her childhood) carry with them the essence of this particular need: 'Over the sounding sea/ Off the wandering sea/ I smelt the smell of the distance/ And longed for another existence'

But such spaces are not just necessary for withdrawal: they offer the potential for dreaming, thinking, for sorties into the imagination, for reflecting and simply for being. There is a potential in these spaces that we scarcely acknowledge or provide for at the moment and as a result they frequently wither into being just private domains. And this in itself is where the potential goes unrecognised; young children need the kinds of classrooms where they have the opportunities and time for sharing and extending these inner worlds with each other. Who could deny the social and intellectual engagement and challenge of so doing? Vygotsky for one, understood the essential dynamic between the social and intellectual for mental growth but his insights are yet to be translated into general present day pedagogical practice.

Teachers who want to understand their children, who want to make sense of what the children seem to be learning (or otherwise) can find that access to those imaginary worlds and spaces to be revelatory. In the kind of classrooms where teachers trust children and vice versa, the key is most usually language. This is because where the children feel they are trusted and where they are encouraged to talk, they feel they can share what is concerning or exciting them most. As Mary Jane Drummond (2003) writes, 'Our attempts as teachers to get inside children's heads and understand their understandings, are enriched to the extent that children themselves are prepared to give us, through their talk, access to their thinking'. She also supports Margaret Meek's (l985) argument

that children's language is at its most powerful within their imaginative structures.

Expanding these worlds, testing them out with and against each other, exploring their boundaries, being exhilarated by the ideas and imaginative worlds of others are all a necessary part of stitching together what it means to understand the outside world and one's fellow companions. Richmal Crompton (1972) with her unerring insight into the nature of childhood, accurately portrayed William as being perennially attractive to his friends precisely because he was always able to offer them new worlds and new possibilities which his fertile imagination never ceased to dream up. Their good sense may have told them to draw back but they usually fell in with his ideas. When, for instance, Douglas demurs to one of William's suggestions it is met by the riposte that 'If the great men in history had all gone on like you, there wouldn't have *been* any great deeds done'. William is able to think on a large scale; despite his abhorrence of school, certain things have left their mark on his receptive inner space and mind.

And what, as adults and teachers do we now offer children in the way of nurturing and extending their imaginations, their inner spaces? Where is the place and time for dance and drama for instance? Do we still think it important, essential even, to take them to places where, for example they can feel and see the actual stones of castles, the vastness of the sea and the stillness of forests? Spaces that while not being 'school', spaces, nonetheless extend, complement and support the provision of the others. Or do we increasingly provide experiences for children that come pre-digested, pre-packaged and, like the junk food it so closely resembles, have little real nutrition for the growing mind and heart?

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