Feeling 'secrety': children's views on involvement in landscape decisions

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To cite this Article Roe, Maggie (2007) 'Feeling 'secrety': children's views on involvement in landscape decisions', Environmental Education Research, 13: 4, 467 – 485

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/13504620701581562

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504620701581562
Feeling ‘secrety’: children’s views on involvement in landscape decisions

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This paper focuses on a case study pilot project working with a small group of children aged 6- to 10-years-old in a village in the northeast of England. The study was established to examine children’s attitudes to environmental issues, particularly their involvement in environmental decisions and their feelings about planning, design and management of neighbourhood landscapes. This paper discusses findings in relation to children’s views on participation and landscape decisions. There was a strong feeling that their local landscapes were not planned or managed in favour of children, that children had a potentially valuable contribution to make and they were willing to voice opinions given the chance. The paper reflects on these findings, particularly the success of the mosaic methodology used in relation to the difficulties and ethics of carrying out exploratory research in participatory projects.

Introduction

Studies of children and landscape have generally focused around their behaviour in and use of their neighbourhood or playground environments (see Hart, 1978; Moore, 1986; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998; Blinkert, 2004). It has been stated that the neighbourhood is ‘one of the most important contexts for, and therefore influences on, children’s social and cultural development’ (Valentine, 1997, p. 139) and there is considerable interest in the importance of outdoor places in young people’s construction of their identity (Sibley, 1991; Barker & Weller, 2003a; Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2003; Elsley, 2004; Todd, 2004).

Some excellent research and project work has now been done over a considerable period to build children’s awareness of the environment (Adams, 1990; Titman, 1994; Dudek, 2005) using a variety of innovative participatory methods, such as storytelling, mapping and creative workshops (Jones, 2004). Although there is research on children’s views of larger scale neighbourhood environments (see Woolley et al.,...
it is most unusual to find decisions being taken by or with children in relation to landscape policy, landscape management or large scale landscape planning. However, some examples have been reported (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002), particularly in relation to developing countries (see Chawla, 2002; Driskell, 2002) but generally, where children are included in participatory landscape projects at a neighbourhood or larger scale, it is with adults, and there appears to be little evidence that adequate provision in participatory projects is provided for children’s voices to be heard or for their views to be properly heeded on such occasions. Nevertheless there is a growing unease concerning the relationship, or lack of relationship that contemporary children have with the environment and the adverse effects this might be having on their health and welfare as well as that of the environment itself. Many childhood issues now discussed commonly in the research literature, in the popular press and in policy circles relate to the environments that children inhabit. Studies have identified the need to take more account of how children use public space as well as consider their changing spatial needs at different ages (see Elsley, 2004).

There is a growing concern over the links being made between child health and well-being and environmental opportunities. Risk and safety, obesity, ‘slob’ or ‘couch-potato’ culture, children’s independence and many other ‘hot’ issues related to childhood have implications for the planning and design of external environments. Gibson’s (1979) theory of ‘affordances’ has been particularly useful to conceptualize and describe environmental opportunities for children and the construction of more child-friendly environments (see Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000; Kyttä, 2002, 2003; Barker & Weller, 2003a). However the lack of regard for and often token consideration of children in landscape decisions is the predominant picture and so a number of questions need to be asked: Why should children’s views be taken account of in relation to larger scale landscape planning and management? Do children have anything useful to contribute? What might children say that could be useful to landscape planners and managers? And, how can children’s voices be heard? This paper focuses the discussion about children’s views on participation and landscape decisions in this neighbourhood scale landscape context.

Community involvement in landscape decisions

Landscape change may be driven by human or natural factors. Considerations of landscape change cannot be divorced from an understanding of how decisions are made to change it. Inclusion in this process of decision-making can create a sense of ‘ownership’ of the landscape. Involvement can also provide a forum for airing views and building consensus and for landscape proposals to reflect the aspirations of the community (Roe, 2000b). There is a growing recognition in the UK that participatory processes can provide a greater understanding of connections between local knowledge, landscape identity, character of place and ecological sustainability.

The advent of Agenda 21 instigated by the Rio Summit has had a considerable effect on community involvement in local environmental decisions in the UK (UNCED, 1992; Sommer, 2000; Sharp, 2002). There is now a growing emphasis on
developing methods to work with particular groups who are disempowered, excluded or disenfranchised from decision-making processes. Such groups include the elderly, minority ethnic groups, young people and children. Although some problems have been highlighted, the picture of more collaborative and partnership working is generally seen as a positive development in environmental planning (Selman, 1998; Roe & Rowe, 2000). A review of the literature shows that there is a considerable body of work relevant to landscape participation generally and in particular to children’s involvement in a variety of projects from both practice and research. An analysis of the general picture of community involvement in landscape decisions and projects indicates that there are two major themes that can be considered relating to social structure and social learning (Roe, 2000a). Social structure broadly covers issues of governance and citizenship while social learning is concerned with issues such as the way communities understand their environment and can learn skills such as those which allow them to communicate their thinking about their environment.

Rydin and Pennington (2000) highlight the problems associated with assuming that all participation is ‘good’ and participatory projects are notoriously difficult to assess, both in terms of validity of information provided and in terms of success of project. Participatory projects can be assessed by qualitative and quantitative indicators, which may be defined by the participants themselves, and by examining the material outcomes and the process outcomes (Margerum & Born, 1995; Roe, 2000a; Chess, 2000; Chawla & Heft, 2002). Such evaluation is of increasing importance to agencies having to justify financial involvement in participatory projects.

Children and participation

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has had considerable influence on the development of research relating to children’s participation in environmental projects (Taylor et al., 2000; Francis & Lorenzo, 2002; Barker & Weller, 2003a) in particular on cross-cultural studies (see Chawla, 2002). However, children are still often viewed as a commodity (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000) or little more than citizens in waiting who may be imbued with an environmental conscience. The involvement of children in decision-making processes relating to environmental issues remains an area where there are considerable limitations (Chawla & Heft, 2002).

A number of authors have developed theory in relation to ethics and understandings of working with children and in relation to participatory projects (see Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001; Driskell, 2002). In relation to local environments and ecological sustainability, Chawla and Heft (2002) define participation ‘to include both formal and informal opportunities to engage with the environment in the public realm’ (p. 202) and suggest that both forms of involvement are useful in building environmental understanding and knowledge. Many different methods have been used and some excellent opportunities have already been provided for children in terms of learning and inclusion in small-scale design processes in the UK through organizations which work with schools to improve their grounds and provide environmental learning facilities (Titman, 1994; Rowe & Wales, 1999). These have highlighted issues concerning
landscape quality and quality of life for children as well as children’s rights. However, much of the thinking behind providing the opportunity for greater involvement by children in environmental change projects still lies in the idea of designated ‘child spaces’ and in education and information-giving rather than in empowering children. There is little evidence of children’s involvement in environmental policy decisions or in projects that influence ‘entrenched structures of decision-making’ (Chawla & Heft, 2002, p. 203). The picture therefore is that although there are many statements and commitments to increase participation, much of these pay lip-service to the ideals of empowerment. Involvement of children in environmental issues is widely seen as ‘difficult’ by policy-makers and professionals (Bartlett, 2002) although some researchers indicate that the participation of children and young people in policy decision-making has spread in many areas in the UK and has been seen to be increasingly moving ‘up’ the ladder of decision-making (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Francis and Lorenzo (2002) have provided a useful review and categorization of children’s participation in city planning and design over the years. The difficulty with such reviews is that the picture for children and young people in terms of research and theory differs considerably depending on the age of the child and the country of focus. The majority of participatory projects generally involve older children and teenagers (i.e., >12-years-old) (Kirby et al., 2003) although there are a few good examples of consultation with the very young (see Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark et al., 2003).

The picture is still therefore in most cases ‘local, scattered, ad hoc, fragile and experimental’ (Prout, 2000, p. 309) with children being ‘invisible in decision-making processes’ (Matthews, 2003, p. 264). Project aims are criticized for being unclear whether they are about environmental improvements relevant to children or about creating a ‘more democratic world’ (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002). Any major change in the culture of exclusion of children is likely to require a considerable shift in societal attitudes and behaviour and there is a danger that this movement to involve children in decision-making may not be sustained (Hill et al., 2004).

**Participatory methods of working with children**

There is a general view that successful participatory methodologies should be flexible and responsive to the participants’ desires and needs and that methods directed by the participants themselves are the most empowering. Researchers working with children caution attempts to generalize and over-emphasize the success of methods employed, even when using child-centred approaches which aim to empower children as these are sometimes more empowering to adults than the children concerned (Barker & Weller, 2003a; Percy-Smith, 2006). Long-term involvement provides the most successful outcomes, but this is often difficult because of project funding and timescales. Lewis and Lindsay (2000) have categorized two main participatory methods that may be used as ‘indirect measures of children’s perspectives’ (meaning drawings, photographs, models, diaries, observation) and ‘direct measures’ (meaning interviews, questionnaires, surveys). They argue that children’s graphic representation is open to ‘misinterpretation or over interpretation’ and therefore needs careful
analysis. Barker and Weller (2003a, b) provide useful reviews of methodologies used with children in geographical studies, while Mauthner (1997), writing from a social science perspective, and Christensen (2004) from an ethnographic perspective, raise issues relating to the ethical difficulties and dimensions of working with children.

**Research design and methodology**

The Children and Local Landscape study discussed in this paper was an exploratory project conceived by two researchers who wished to bring together their own previous experience and interests; one strongly related to children’s issues and the other to community involvement relating to large scale landscape projects. The study was carried out in a village in the northeast of England. One of the researchers lived with her family in the village and, as an active member of this community, had taken part in a recent project run by an external environment agency. This project centred on the alleviation of pollution and flooding of the river and aimed to involve the local community in trying to address the history of disputes over environmental management in the village. However, at the main participatory event no children were invited and their opinions were not sought by the organizers even though some children had become interested and were involved in the preparatory activities. So the initial aim of the Children and the Local Landscape study was simply to try to address this omission and to provide local children with an opportunity to express their views on their relationship with the river and other features and characteristics of the wider neighbourhood landscape. The project was regarded as a pilot project that would also allow the researchers to investigate methods suitable for working with young children in this context. Background work was carried out through literature reviews and through discussion with others involved in working with children. Seed-corn funding was obtained from a university-based scheme for exploratory projects.

We invited children throughout the village to participate in the research through a leafleting and poster campaign. The resulting group was self-selected. A small group of children (five girls and two boys) aged 6- to 10-years-old volunteered to take part in the study which ran over eight months and which was designed as an in-depth project. Although we used existing connections with these children, which quickly helped to build a relationship of trust, the context was entirely outside school or other existing ‘organized’ groups. The aims, area of focus (within the overall context of the children’s relationship with the environment) and the methods were discussed, developed and chosen by researchers and children working together within an overall framework of day-long sessions which took place at weekends and which culminated in a three-day workshop held during the holiday period. We took an approach based on an understanding of children’s rights and participation in similar projects (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998; Save the Children, 2005). At the introductory session our discussion with the group revealed that in addition to involvement in steering the project, the children clearly wanted the activities to be fun and this, apart from an ample supply of biscuits, was the only added inducement to participation. An
introduction for parents was also provided at this first session and at this point we gained the necessary agreements of all concerned to take part in the research.

The children all live in former coalminers’ cottages on the edge of the village. Surrounded by fields, a brook, a large river, a village green, riparian scrub and woodland, the children’s immediate context is predominantly rural in character (Figure 1). However the layout of the former miners’ cottages is more reminiscent of terraced housing stock in urban areas, with the front of the houses facing onto what would actually be a back lane in the city, and gardens at the rear of the houses. The communal

Figure 1. The landscape character of the study area is predominantly rural
landscape then abuts these gardens with some areas of ‘no-man’s land’ (marginal areas between the farm land and the gardens).

The project used a participatory adapted ‘mosaic’ methodology developed from research at Reggio Emilia and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approaches used by others in work with young children (Edwards et al., 1998; Clark & Moss, 2001; McCormack, 2002; Clark et al., 2003; Clark, 2004). This used a range of observational, child-initiated and inclusive methods (Figure 2) that tried to recognize and

<table>
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<td>Diaries with drawings, photos, written descriptions, analysis and comment</td>
<td>Guided tours by children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Play and games</td>
<td>Photos of landscape features, favourite places, etc</td>
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Figure 2. Activities used in the project based on an adapted mosaic approach (after Clark & Moss, 2001)
interpret the different ‘languages’ of children and avoid simply consulting them (Cairns, 2001; Kirby et al., 2003). The focus was on reiterative creative expression and self-interpretation where the process was as important as the product (Edwards et al., 1998). The environment was particularly important in this process and was seen as ‘the third teacher’ with the children building upon knowledge of their own surroundings.

We considered possible issues relating to validity of data. However such issues are not confined to research with children and a number of methods of cross-validation are now commonly used for triangulation or establishing ‘trustworthiness’ in participatory work in a variety of contexts (see Pretty, 1995). The mosaic methodology allowed us to address issues of validity because the use of a variety of methods over a period of time allowed the children to express their views in many different ways. Using individual and group methods, plus talking to parents helped us to identify where the same views were being consistently expressed and key issues raised. The feedback methodology also allowed the children themselves to review issues mentioned in previous sessions. We felt that validity was an important issue to address because the tendency for the lack of children’s participation in decision-making about local landscape issues may indeed be a result of a lack of confidence by policy-makers and others in data gained from working with children. Professionals seem to shy away from working with children, and policy-makers often do not take children’s views seriously (Matthews et al., 1999). The reason for this may be partly because there is a poor understanding that cross-validation can be built into project methodology design.

Many of the sessions in our project were recorded (with the children’s permission) and transcribed. Two main researchers worked throughout the project and other specialists (e.g., to enable the play and video sessions) were brought in occasionally. Many of the activities were suggested by the children themselves. Other suggestions made by the researchers were discussed with the children and their ideas and desires were fed into the development of the sessions. Each day started with a discussion to reflect on previous sessions and to determine the day’s activities, many of which followed on from those initiated in previous sessions (e.g., the development, performance and videoing of a play). We used a ‘reflecting-in-action’ as well as a ‘reflecting-on-action’ (Schön, 1983) approach where both children and researchers reviewed the various activities carried out and the views expressed. The analysis was aided by the iterative nature of the process. Approximately half of the time was spent outside (dependent on weather conditions) and the rest in a variety of indoor activities (Figure 2). Although the children were asked about their feelings and relationships with the landscape and about their desires for potential changes that might be made in management and policy, they were not asked specifically to redesign the local landscape.

Findings and analysis: the children’s views on involvement in decision-making

The project revealed considerable data concerning children’s views on decision-making about the environment and about their own lives. Many of the references
made were in relation to parents or teachers, but much of it was more generalized including issues of children’s rights in relation to environmental decisions. In a group session the children defined ‘participation’ as: ‘Taking part’ (Violet); ‘Making a wish’ (Miranda); ‘Taking part in everything’ (Alfie); ‘Taking part in the environment’ (Max). The children generally agreed that it was good for people to listen to each other. The issue of whether adults listen to children seemed to be of particular interest and the connection was made between adults not listening and children’s lives being affected in an adverse way as a result. Other, more positive points were made: ‘children sometimes have really good ideas and they [adults] need to know what children think if they’re going to change something’ (Miranda) and also that ‘children have better ideas sometimes’ (Max—thoughts in scrapbook).

There was also an understanding that events or feelings might get in the way of adults discussing matters with children, or listening to them properly: ‘Most parents listen to children. Some don’t because they’re out late or they don’t want to listen’ (Violet). However, when talking further about this, the same child (Violet) also suggested that children might not be listened to: ‘Because they [parents] don’t think they’ve good ideas’. Why? ‘Because they are young’ (Violet). There was a feeling that much information that children might like to know was not discussed with them: ‘People don’t tell us about things that much [even at school]’ (Patrick); ‘It’s like you’re invisible’ (Layla). Miranda felt that ‘if things were different they would listen and sometimes adults listen but sometimes when they are really stressed out and busy they don’t listen at all, they just say “that’s very nice” and really they’ve just ignored you’.

There was a general consensus that it would be a good idea for children to be consulted by adults over environmental matters. There was a feeling that children should be listened to even though they might not always be right. The children themselves decided to make a video of a play which would represent their views about the environment which could be shown to policy-makers, parents, teachers and other adults; they felt that the video could be useful for both adults and children to see and might be an example for children to show ‘what they could actually achieve if they put their minds to it; ... a chance to express their opinions’ (Miranda). Alfie was quite adamant that the video could portray a strong message: ‘Never mess around with nature—or it will have revenge!’ (Alfie).

In discussions more directly connected to the planning, design and management of the local landscape, there was considerable negativity about the ability of children to affect decisions. This appeared to have grown directly out of their own experience such as their observations on the results of the local environmental project based on the river and in relation to management of trees on what they perceived to be part of ‘their’ home range. So when asked whether they felt that adults who were responsible for looking after the neighbourhood landscape would listen to the children’s views, Layla said: ‘If they were told to, I think they would [listen]’. She felt that this would only happen if the managers were compelled to do so, but even then she said:
I think they would ask us but wouldn’t take our ideas seriously. Because when they asked all the adults about … making the bank [of the river] bigger … well none of the adults really wanted it to happen, but they still went ahead with it anyway … They wouldn’t even listen to the adults, so they wouldn’t, definitely not, listen to us.

One of the younger children was more willing to believe that he would be listened to: Do you think the [Local] Council would listen to you? (Researcher): ‘Probably yeah ‘cos the Council doesn’t just care for nature but it cares for all the people too’ (Max).

It emerged that the children had a particularly strong affinity with trees, which were used as lookout posts, places to swing and play on (Figure 3) and were identified as special because of their beauty, the way they helped indicate seasons, and they were used as places for contemplation. There was considerable frustration shown by the children when a local farmer concerned with safety cut back some of the children’s favourite swing trees which stretched out over the village green without asking the children how they felt about it. This issue came out several times such as when asked why it might be important for people to look at their work books, Max answered: ‘If people get the book they won’t chop all the trees down … they will know what is right for them and wrong for them’. And ‘children might have more ideas and very good ideas and I think it should be that way’ (Max). Miranda felt that if children were asked about tree management ‘they wouldn’t cut the older trees down and they wouldn’t
cut the younger trees down and the rest of the trees are just fun to bounce on so no I don’t think they’d cut any trees down’.

‘Feeling secrecy’

The issues of listening and children’s rights were also linked by the children to the knowledge that they might hold and which adults need to access in order to create better environments and conditions. When asked why adults should find out what children think, the children were quite clear that although children needed adults to make changes they wanted, children also ‘might know more than grown ups’ (Patrick). Here communication was deemed important: ‘If you play with your children [they] might give you more ideas’ (Patrick). The children felt that they had special knowledge about the environment—particularly about special places—and it was felt that it was important to have knowledge of the landscape as the basis for decision-making:

It really makes you cross ‘cos the grown ups spend—apart from some grown ups—don’t spend anytime in the environment at all and when it comes, like the Government, they just sit in a room all day and they don’t go out in the environment yet they make all the important decisions. (Miranda).

The children expressed a need to be able to use places within their home ranges that were not managed by adults and that they did not feel that adults know about. This was described particularly by Layla who highlighted an area near the stream that was wild and untidy, with little or no adult ‘management’:

I like it when the grass is really long and nobody has touched it for ages. Like when it’s been cut or people have been playing there—it’s just different. If I think the council knew about it they would try to clean it up more—it hasn’t got any rubbish there but they’d cut the grass around it and everything and I wouldn’t like that ‘cos you feel secrety and you’ve got the grass all long around you.

She went on to describe that when the grass was long, it indicated that adults probably had not been there for a while and if it was cut, it would indicate that it was no longer a secret place and consequently would no longer be special. This need for ‘feeling secrecy’ was expressed in various different ways by the children indicating a need, not only to have special places, but to have some control over the spaces within their home ranges which may appear wild or unkempt. It also resonates with the idea that there is a general loss of potentially unmanicured and ‘found places’ within the play ranges of children. Such places are often regarded by adults to be semi-derelict and neglected land, but they provide considerable affordances for children.6 Having special places was important to all the children and the places they described were often on the boundaries of their home ranges. They were also considered by the younger children to be secret from adults. However Layla, the eldest child in the group, thought that parents probably did know where the children’s favourite places were because ‘you usually stick with the same place, you don’t change it all the time and like when you’re little, when you go there your mum and dad usually come
with you’. The need to have special places to play in, or simply ‘hang out’, in these children concurs with the findings of other studies, particularly with older children (see Matthews, 2001; Korpela et al., 2002; Percy-Smith, 2002).

It was clear that the children thought that they often held different views, might also see things in different ways and would express themselves in ways adults might not understand: ‘We see things in different ways. Adults might not be bothered in what we see … childhood is a big change in our life’ (Layla). However these children seemed to take for granted the idea that adults would take their means of expression seriously although the children seemed to feel that for adults the use of words (written and spoken) was of particular importance.

Conclusions and recommendations

If we return to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, the literature indicates that it is important for children’s views to be heard in relation to landscape matters. Involvement in environmental decision-making is now supported by researchers focusing on spatial and environmental issues with children (see Matthews & Limb, 1999; Freeman et al., 1999) and this study provides some further support to the idea that making ‘space’ for young children to become involved in environmental planning and management at a neighbourhood level could provide more responsive environments as well as achieve other aims relating to the children themselves. The findings of this project indicate that young children do have a useful contribution to make in the design and planning of local landscapes. For example, the children identified a clear need for their ‘own’ spaces that do not appear to be maintained or managed by adults. This is a considerable challenge to landscape planners and managers, but not impossible. Blinkert’s (2004) study highlighted the need for more research on how the spatial conditions of childhood have changed and the implications of an increasing loss of ‘action space’ outside the home. This project adds to the evidence that children should not be segregated into special ‘child’ spaces in the landscape, that they are able to articulate understandings of landscape management issues and they can provide useful views on landscapes beyond the playground and school.

The study revealed the use of a wide range of spaces according to the children’s activities, perception and attitudes towards the landscape (Figure 4), similar to those described by Clark (2004). Further development of this thinking could provide local planners and designers with useful tools for the design and management of neighbourhood landscapes. However, Freeman et al. (1999) also state that there are two major problems with those dealing with the design, planning and regulation of the built environment (planners, housing officers, architects, environmental health officers, engineers and landscape architects) and these are: (i) that they are ill-equipped to consider or meet children’s participation because of little consideration given to children’s needs, desires or wishes; and (ii) that they generally ‘ignore children’ (p. 114). This study confirms that the view of children themselves is that this is so. These children were clearly frustrated by the lack of provision for their views to be heard in the original community project related to the river; however this did provide
Figure 4. Children’s photos of favourite places show a variety of landscape spaces and features.

Handwritten note:
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this is my favourite place
because it is a very nice place to play games like taggy, football, sticky in the mud.
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us and them with a catalyst and enthusiasm for our study which tried to provide the children with opportunities to express their views.\footnote{4}

It is also clear from this and other studies that children’s understanding of the environment is not the same as that of adults and their valuation of landscape features is different. Perceptions of safety and risk in the environment differ between children and parents (Roe, 2006) and there has long been an understanding that children need to be able to challenge themselves physically as well as in other ways as part of their learning process. This study indicates that children of this age group are willing to negotiate boundaries of freedom in relation to parental fears, which they understand, but the key issue here is that children like to feel they have been consulted and they have something valuable to contribute. Discussion with parents in our study showed that they may be as influenced by fears related to landscape features such as rivers as they are by ‘stranger danger’ in some locations.

The issue of how children’s views can be incorporated into decision-making is more difficult to assess in spite of the general picture indicated by our literature review that participatory work with young people and children is increasing. In our study we did not fully address this issue. Potential outputs of the project were discussed with the children and this resulted in two videos, one which appeared on the BBC Video Nation web site (see Favourite Place: www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/t/tyne_favouriteplace.shtml), and the other was shown to parents and children and then to the wider community through a meeting at the village hall. The children were also keen for us as researchers to write and publish research papers relating to the project. We made it clear to the children that this was an exploratory project for us and to allow them to express their views about their own relationship with the neighbourhood environment, to explore methods to do this and to think about the form and mechanisms by which such views could be raised with policy-makers, landscape professionals and the rest of the community. Others have recognized that providing children with opportunities for ‘having a say’ is not enough (Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006). The key issue here is how findings of our research could have been fed back to decision-makers and in retrospect we should perhaps have explored mechanisms by which this might happen prior to starting the sessions with the children. This is clearly a problem with exploratory research related to participatory work. So although dissemination was discussed, it was not adequately resolved with the children; although they were keen to have their views heard and most of them believed that some people would listen, they showed great reluctance to engage directly with decision-makers themselves. This may have much to do with the perception of a general lack of ability to influence decision-makers as well as the way existing participatory work is deeply embedded within the child-adult attitudes and cultures of control, particularly in relation to young children. In this project the children’s perceptions of participatory working was influenced not only by their own experience in relation to the original community project related to the river issues, but also by their understanding of the perceptions of parents. So there is a wider issue related to participatory decisions in general that needs to be heeded by local authorities and others currently involved in such work. The success of future involvement by communities
in landscape planning and management decisions may depend largely upon the experiences passed to children by parents and on the ‘spaces’ provided for all members of communities to engage meaningfully in such decisions (Percy-Smith, 2006). Present attitudes by children (as shown in our project) as well as future attitudes to participatory working may thus be affected.

The self-selection of the participants meant that there was considerable enthusiasm on the children’s part to work as co-investigators which might not have been so where different selection criteria were used. We recognized that the size and composition of the group (predominantly female) needed to be considered in the assessment of the robustness of our conclusions. What we determined was specific to these children in this context.

The issue of language and expression in particular is one which requires further investigation. The children in this project seemed to be indicating that although the lack of understanding by adults of children’s needs and wishes was sometimes about not listening, it was also sometimes about not understanding what was being communicated in relation to environmental issues. The pioneering work already carried out by Clark, Matthews, Moore and others mentioned earlier, provides us with an excellent starting point for further work in this area of environmental planning. Thinking about communication methods may also provide us with more creativity in participatory working with many different groups and might help us develop alternatives to the standard consultative methods commonly being carried out in relation to environmental planning in this country. The flexibility of this project allowed for the children to have a major input into decisions concerning the detailed aims and methods. This was facilitated by the use of the mosaic methodology, multiple activities and the reflective nature of the work. Thus the focus of the study changed from the initial idea to examine issues to do with the river, to one where wider issues of the children’s relationship with the environment and the landscape of the neighbourhood predominated. Although such flexibility in aims might not be possible in many projects, this project did show that the mosaic methodology provided rich data and enabled the children to express themselves in many different ways in relation to neighbourhood scale landscape issues.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the children and families who took part in this study, to Karen Scott, Research Assistant on the study, and to Newcastle University for providing funding in the form of an Innovation Grant.

Notes

2. A recent project with an older group of young people indicated that ‘fun was a core value, along with cooperation, participation and sharing, thoughtful action, respect, open and fair processes, and positive encouragement’ (Douglas, 2006, p. 352). These values were also enshrined in our approach.


4. Pseudonyms are used for the children and the name of the village is not given at the children’s request.

5. The text written by the children as the basis for their videoed play is as follows:

A farmer planted some seeds—his name is poor farmer Sam.

He watered the seeds and the seeds started to grow. Poor farmer Sam watered the trees day and night and the seeds grew bigger and bigger. Poor farmer Sam, he loved his trees and Squirrel Nutkins and his animal friends. Poor farmer Sam has no money, he has to sell his wood to Mr Has-no-name who has a big company.

Poor farmer Sam, he goes away with £20 in his pocket and tears rolling down his cheeks.

Mr Has-no-name is very pleased with himself and he goes to the woods to chop down the trees.

The Spirit jumped out of the tree right at Mr Has-no-name. He is scared and he runs back to his mummy. Poor farmer Sam took the chopped wood and turned it into furniture. And the wood grew again.


7. At the end of the study the children expressed a desire to take part in future sessions if this could be arranged.

Notes on contributors

Maggie Roe is Senior Lecturer at Newcastle University. Her research interests are based on large scale landscape planning and sustainability issues, particularly in relation to people’s perception of and relationship with the landscape. Recent research focuses on the development of green infrastructure theory and methods, the relationship between children and the landscape, participatory landscape planning in coastal areas and work in China and Bangladesh. Maggie is Deputy Editor of Landscape Research, a Board Member of the national Landscape Research Group (LRG) and a member of the Landscape Institute’s Research Committee.

References


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