

THESIS SYNOPSIS

Grounds for Learning: Schoolyard Activities as Provocations, Scaffolds and Mediators for Childhood Learning

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Thesis Synopsis

Compelling evidence links childhood experiences in quasi-natural settings with learning and wellbeing, but, as cities grow, children's activities have been increasingly restricted to de-natured spaces that are designed or controlled by adults. In recent years, academics and education practitioners have campaigned to reverse this trend, and one result is that Australian early childhood centres and schools increasingly provide environments that enhance opportunities for children to engage with nature. These moves are also underpinned by higher-level policy initiatives. For example, the *National Quality Standard*, Element 3.2.1, requires that early childhood outdoor spaces are designed so that children experience natural environments (ACECQA, 2013). Similarly, the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (2016, p. 5) *Outdoor Learning Environments Standard* mandates 'balanced environments which instil a sense of wonder, generate curiosity and spark the imagination of children and young people'. However, despite recent interest and policy initiatives, the processes by which environments influence learning remain 'under-researched' (Engelen et al., 2013, p. 324) and constitute a 'significant blind spot' (Rickinson et al., 2004, p. 8) in the literature.

This doctoral thesis is a response to evidence that childhood experiences of nature influence learning and wellbeing. It reports on primary school children's self-chosen recess and lunchtime activities in a naturalised outer-suburban school that was conceived, developed, and maintained as an educational resource. With a synthesis of

Gibsonian (1979, 1992) and neo-Vygotskian (1934/1978, 2004) psychology as its theoretical framework, the research uses process tracing methodology (George & Bennett, 2005) to identify that environments influence learning at three levels. First, materiality influences what learners perceive and assimilate. For example, when playing with sticks, children may notice the basic operation of levers. Second, perceiving the meanings of environmental artefacts and places mediates (Miller, 2011) higher order learning. For example, when children discover four sticks arranged as a rectangle, perceiving the rectangle potentially mediates the concept of enclosure as understood by the person who created the rectangle. Third, by participating in activities that add layers of meaning to natural and non-prescriptive materials, children may attend to the meanings imbued in places, artefacts, and actions, thereby expanding their understandings of and capacity to influence those elements.

Grounds for Learning sheds light on how naturalised environments influence the processes of children's learning. In so doing, the thesis challenges researchers, educators and designers to reconceptualise outdoor environments as places where:

- (a) learners socially exchange, perceive, experiment with and adapt information;
- (b) activities and perceptions mediate higher-level learning;
- (c) participation in world-making activities scaffolds individual and collective transformations of established norms and practices.

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Author Biography

Paul is an educator with 30 years' experience in settings ranging from early years to tertiary. As ecoliteracy teacher at Galilee Catholic School, Aldinga (2007–2015), he led the formation and development of outdoor learning environments, curriculum, and pedagogies. Paul writes, presents, and consults on learning environment design and pedagogy, and his work has received awards from Flinders University Faculty of Science and Engineering, South Australian Early Childhood Organisation, and the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia. Currently Paul is curriculum coordinator at Arbury Park Outdoor School. Email: paul@groundsforlearning.com.au.