

A 'two-year prison sentence', or a chance to grow?

Bill Lucas is Director of Learning through Landscapes, a flexible and responsive organisation undertaking a range of activities designed to improve the quality of school grounds.

Bill Lucas

School grounds can seriously damage your health!

In the past ten years much valuable research has been undertaken in a number of important aspects of the relationship between health and education. One significant area, the external environment of schools, has however largely been overlooked. This is an odd and critical omission, given the huge impact on those who use them.

Children spend at least a quarter of their eleven years in formal education in the grounds of their schools. It is for most of them their first sustained experience of a public outdoor environment. I need hardly remind you just how dreadful this actually is for many children — a kind of prison sentence, equivalent to more than two years of schooling. Like all such punishments it leaves both obvious and more subtle scars on those who have been imprisoned.

Disorientating

When torturers wish to disorientate their victims, they frequently create a featureless environment in which to place them. Years of ignorance and under-investment have produced just such landscapes in too many of the UK's 30,000 schools. Treeless and featureless tarmac, rectangular, dreary and inappropriate spaces predominate.

Recent cases of child-molesting and abduction point to danger just outside the school fence. Eye diseases passed to children through faeces make dogs unwelcome visitors. Even the litter which drifts on to some sites can be dangerous and unsavoury.

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In this article I am not proposing to write about these obvious dangers to health. My subject is the school landscape itself — land which is in many ways an even greater health hazard.

Threats

The scale of the educational estate in the UK is enormous. There are approximately 30,000 schools, and their grounds cover more than 150,000 acres. Without being alarmist, here are just a few of the ways in which they pose a distinct threat to the health of the nation's children:

- Climatically-exposed sites produce cold, wet children.
- Sites with no shelter encourage groups of children to wander around aimlessly in search of warmth and privacy.
- Hard rectangles of tarmac are dominated by boys. They are battle-grounds where upper-body fractures are all too common as children career around frenetically.
- Schools with no seats outside encourage children to sit on the cold hard tarmac and reinforce feelings of hostility.
- Ill-designed spaces — narrow paths, unsupervised corridors, for example — coupled with the generally unstimulating nature of most outdoor school areas, may promote negative antisocial behaviour.
- Featureless grounds encourage boredom and the negative behaviour that follows from this.

A session in the 'outdoor classroom' at Ton yr Ywen primary school, Cardiff. © Andrew Jeffrey.



I could easily extend this list, but would like to think that the message is clear. Put simply, most school grounds do not meet the needs of the children who grow up in them. In a variety of physical, attitudinal and psychological ways, children are not well served by many schools.

Innovative

This depressing situation is now being taken seriously by an organisation called Learning through Landscapes (LTL). In 1985 it was established as a research project. Set up by the Department for Education and Science, the Countryside Commission and a consortium of local authorities, it spent the first three years looking at the design, use, management and development of school grounds all over the UK. Although its findings confirmed that the negative picture I painted earlier was largely correct, it also highlighted the innovative work of a few schools.

In 1990, based on this research, *The Outdoor Classroom* was published by the government. In the same year, LTL was launched as an independent national charity. It aims to promote improvements to the quality of school grounds and to extend the range of educational use made of them.

In two short years extraordinary progress has been made, and the name of the organisation has become a phrase used by educators and environ-

mentalists to encapsulate the best practice in school grounds and outdoor education.

LTL is now working directly with 32 LEAs, and has established more than a hundred regional groups throughout the UK. Last year it dealt with three thousand schools. It has published 15 books and two videos, and has made a substantial impact on the educational scene.

Ask the children

We also continue to research into many aspects of school grounds development. Of particular interest to readers might be some work currently nearing completion which we have been undertaking with the World Wide Fund for Nature.

This research, co-ordinated by Wendy Titman, is producing some extraordinary findings. For the first time we have asked children directly to talk about their feelings towards different aspects of the school landscape. What they have told us confirms our concerns that grounds have a very strong influence on the development of children's attitudes. It also challenges many assumptions about what it is that children would actually like to do outside. The results of this research will be available in Spring 1993.

Defining the processes

Partly through our work at a national level, most schools now recognise that their grounds

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could be developed. When contemplating changes, however, they are understandably nervous about the complexity of the endeavour. This is where LTL can help. By offering support and advice we can help headteachers to see that there is a clearly-defined set of management processes which need to be addressed. These can be grouped under three main headings.

Why change?

For many schools, this is the easy part. Parental dissatisfaction or child unhappiness may have provided the spur. Conversely, it might be through an awareness of the obvious benefits to the curriculum, or for children's play, or to enhance the school's image in the community.

At this stage it is important for schools to have a clear idea of why they want to make changes.

How to go about change

It is this aspect of the process which schools find most difficult. Many of them leave it out altogether, moving straight from statements like "We must do something about the playground" to "Let's buy some play equipment and stick it over there by the wall!" LTL attempts to help schools spend time working their way through a series of important activities which make it more likely that changes will be sustainable and appropriate to children's needs.

There are two very important elements at the start of this stage. They are the undertaking of a comprehensive grounds survey and the identification of the needs of children, teachers and parents. To help schools undertake the survey, LTL has produced a photocopiable pack, *Esso Schoolwatch*, which has already been bought by 2,500 schools.

Identifying needs is a more complex task, and our experience shows that it is important to approach this systematically. When identifying the needs of the pupils it is helpful to ask them what they would like to *do* outside. (They will say things like climbing, hiding, sitting quietly and enjoying getting dirty!) It is then possible to work back from this list to create possible features for the school landscape. It is much better to do it this way round than starting with a shopping-list of 'things' that the children want to 'have'. (They may indicate things like Disney-world, a theme park, a zoo or expensive play equipment of limited long-term value.) With staff it will be important to identify activities in the formal and informal curriculum which they would like to be able to undertake.

A period of intensive planning then follows, one which is probably best managed by a steering group of some kind. It will involve co-ordinating a range of ideas, consulting relevant professionals such as landscape architects, raising money and, of course, making a detailed plan of action.

What to change

It can take quite a long time to reach the moment when you dig the first hole, plant the first tree or put in your first sculpture. It will definitely have been time well spent, as there is every likelihood that what you have decided to do will be approved of and enjoyed by your pupils, teachers and parents alike.

It is impossible to do justice to the range of possible landscape features which schools have chosen to include. The most popular are undoubtedly ponds, nature areas and trees, with butterfly gardens, seating, play equipment and shrubbery. LTL's publications indicate the scope of possible ideas. But it is the quality of the process and the need to take a holistic overview that are most important to stress.

Enriching

With even moderately-developed grounds it will be possible to use your outdoor classroom to teach almost every subject in the curriculum. Children will also be able to play and develop in a way which is likely to be healthy. For many schools, the decrease in the number of accidents is startling. Children discover a new sense of responsibility and pride in their environment. Parents start to want to be involved. Supervision becomes easier. The landscape becomes a gentler and more civilised place. The benefits are clear for pupils, parents, teachers, governors and the local community. LTL has examples of schools which have made improvements like these in every area of the UK and will happily help to put you in touch with them.

Many school grounds should carry a government health warning. That much is clear. Equally they can be delightfully special areas where children can grow up in security and with considerable sensory, mental and physical stimulation. It does not follow like night after day that they will be happier, but it is, in our experience, highly likely that the school will be a healthier place. Certainly, the process of developing the educational landscape is an enriching one for all concerned.