



Welcoming children back to school with outdoor construction

[Guest post](#) / [Leave a Comment](#) / By [Prof Jan White](#) / March 10, 2021 March 10, 2021

There has been a lot of talk about ‘learning loss’, children being ‘behind’ and needing to ‘catch up’ – which seems very likely to only add to children’s stress levels and related mental health issues. Isn’t it important that we counter this toxic and dangerous rhetoric by focusing on mental and physical wellbeing and the learning that naturally flows during play? I’m sure that readers of this blog share concerns about this kind of thinking and language, and have plans to do what they believe is right for the children they care for and play with.

Surely the emphasis must be firmly upon children feeling good about themselves, feeling good with others and being able to trust the world beyond their homes. Our children so clearly need space, time, friends and play: ample, unhurried time with friends to play with; physically active play; focus on their own concerns and interests; peace and calm from external fears and demands. This is a combination that the outdoors is oh so ready to supply – enabled by adults who recognise this and ‘get’ how the best learning happens through whole-bodied play, interacting with each other and with the world.

This post from Monica Keenan at [St Clare's Abbey Primary School](#) in Newry, Northern Ireland, where she is P2 (Y1) Teacher and Play Coordinator for Foundation Stage, is an exciting example of this understanding in action. This coordinator role has been created to raise the profile of play throughout the whole school and the wider school community. To welcome their children back this week, they have been developing an enormous sand area in the school grounds, with an initial focus on providing for children’s emotional and social needs. I hope we’ll get to hear about how this goes in a future post.

Monica’s piece shows many things: what a ‘generous environment’ looks like; how the outdoors works for children’s education; how adults can take the role of fascinated play and learning companions (*fascinated* by what children do, say and think; *companions* in the questioning and finding-out approach that learning is for young children). Monica’s writing especially conveys how exciting and rewarding moving towards a learning through play approach to teaching in schools can be, outdoors and indoors, all the way through to age 6.



Welcoming children back to school with outdoor construction by Monica Keenan

Over the last few years, myself and my colleagues at St Clare's Abbey Primary School Newry N.I, have revamped our approach to Learning Through Play under the guidance of [Early Years Advisor, Clare Devlin](#). In this blog I am delighted to share my experience of Outdoor Construction.

Outdoor construction gives children the freedom to become totally immersed in play. Children revel in the physical challenge, experimenting with ways of lifting, moving and connecting the large-scale resources. [Pete Moorhouse](#) emphasises how we cannot underestimate the potential learning when children encounter 'original problems'. I have found that this statement is incredibly true for Outdoor Construction. Before we embarked on this approach to Learning Through Play there was often an air of frustration and exasperation leading to some children immediately seeking adult support when met with a problem.

However, now we observe perseverance and cries of excitement when a child works out a solution. Children learn very quickly from each other in this environment, for example, noticing how others share resources and work with each other. A few weeks ago, to my delight, I observed a group of children as they decided to bargain with each other and began trading equipment. This phenomenon caught on and we discussed it during plenary sessions, drawing out the learning at whole class level.



The development of Language and Literacy skills happens intrinsically in this area. The children have access to a portable 'mark making trolley' with whiteboards, notebooks, pencils, pens and copious pieces of cardboard. They are involved in drawing designs, signs, and posters to support their own ideas and the ideas of others. Our indoor writing area four years ago involved the adults brainstorming fancy ways to entice the children to come and write.

Fast forward now, and the children are begging and negotiating with their peers to have a go making signs for their construction. Our plenary sessions are key in developing language and literacy skills. Children have opportunities to speak to the class, about their experiences, fielding the opinions and questions of others. The adult directs the learning by providing language for the children to articulate their thinking and asking thought provoking questions.



Now, how do we plan for this type of play? Clare Devlin's advice involves cross referencing the Curriculum with the needs of the children and selecting the relevant learning intentions across all key areas of learning. Following this, the adults work together to come up with possibilities for learning, e.g., *exploring stability, force, movement, working in a team, sharing, articulating ideas etc.* By observing and listening to the play, the direction the learning can take becomes apparent.

Sometimes this is an interest in bridges, or machines; in my most recent experience it was investigating how to make a ball travel along a pathway! The origins of this project came from one small group of children who had experimented with resources to create a ramp for a ball. They discovered the impact height, gravity and force had on the movement of the ball and were keen to share their findings. Other children approached the group and negotiated their way onto the building team. They used different raised surfaces, made the ramp longer, higher, steeper, alongside working out how best to take turns and improve their creation.



There was such a buzz around the classroom over the next few days; everyone wanted to be involved! More ideas and questions emerged; *get a smaller ball, make the ramp higher, use more space, can it be longer than that?* At the beginning of the next session, encouraged by the writing of Duckett and Drummond, I established two separate building teams; we chatted about how to start the process and then I stood back and watched.

The play that unfolded was just incredible, the children were so engaged and focused. They argued over ideas, listened to each other, shared equipment and even stole equipment (begrudgingly having to give it back to the other team when caught by peers!). The adults played alongside the children and supported conversations, stopping the process at various stages to facilitate 'meetings' and scaffolding the learning experiences as needed.



Carefully chosen resources for outdoor construction will determine the quality of learning. We source low/no cost resources in numerous ways; parental donations, collections from builders' yards and visits to a Scrap store in Belfast City, Play Resource Centre. Resources ranging from bricks, tyres, pipes, to spools, crates, planks of wood, and bottle lids. The most expensive resource is our large hollow wooden blocks. In St Clare's Abbey we are lucky to have two fabulous caretakers who play an instrumental role in managing and maintaining our Outdoor Construction Area. I work closely with them and they are always willing to help solve storage problems and work with resources to reveal hidden potential.

In our school, Primary 1 and Primary 2 children usually share these resources, using them at different times of the day. However, due to the Covid.19 restrictions and classroom bubbles, we had to come up with a different plan. The resources were split between P1 and P2, and a timetable was organised, allowing classes within each year group access, alternating on a weekly basis.



In my early experiences of Outdoor Construction, I was keen to learn how to support children's learning without interrupting and over directing. There are a few books and articles that have been pivotal in changing my mindset and improving my understanding: Jan White's [*Playing and Learning Outdoors*](#), Duckett and Drummond's [*Adventuring in Early Childhood Education*](#) and articles on www.communityplaythings.co.uk.

Upon meeting Clare Devlin, I was intrigued by her approach to Learning Through Play, albeit apprehensive about what lay ahead. As I have worked with Clare over the last few years, a passion for Learning Through Play has been ignited in me. I would love all educators to become aware that the skills which can be developed through meaningful play experiences, simply cannot be taught sitting in a classroom. So, get your coat on and go for it!

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