

Feeding the Spirit: The Need for Natural Settings in Children's Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the potential for elementary school grounds/playgrounds to support learning and social/emotional development, primarily through the use of natural settings. In the broadest sense the research seeks to discover how children relate to the environment and how learning and social/emotional development are connected to the physical environment. More specifically, it examines how the character of school grounds affects children in terms of emotional and overall learning, and how natural settings support learning.

Research methods included a multidisciplinary review of the literature (drawing primarily from resources in developmental psychology, environmental psychology, education, law, landscape architecture, and architecture), and two case studies with Seattle School District elementary schools. Data were collected via 28 interviews with elementary school children between the ages of six and eleven. Eight adults associated with the schools were also included in the study as a means of learning more about the school context and to provide a source for comparison.

Children's emotional connections to nature are established, revealing that positive attributes such as imagination, perception, creativity, sensory integration, and self-esteem have been associated with children's experiences in nature. The way in which

children learn is reviewed, based on predominant theories of play and development. Experience is isolated as a commonality among the theories, and aspects of the natural environment that support the notion of "experience" are explored. The natural physical environment is discussed as an integrating mechanism for curriculum-based projects and the acquisition of content knowledge.

Playground characteristics are related to emotional attribute development, in terms of safety, comfort, sense of belonging, altruism, self-esteem, sociability, creativity and motivation. Liability and maintenance issues associated with Seattle School District public school grounds are presented. The case study findings are analyzed based on patterns of meaning that emerged through children's responses.

Overall, the findings of this research reveal that natural settings serve as a powerful integrating mechanism, allowing children to engage themselves in learning, physically as well as mentally, catering to a spectrum of intelligences and learning styles. Multi-use natural settings on school grounds have a profound impact on the learning that occurs during free play time, as well as the learning that occurs through hands-on curriculum based projects.

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