

**FINDING A SCHOOL - FINDING A SCHOOL GROUNDS -  
SUPPORTING DOCUMENTARY, INTERVIEW, AND STATISTICAL  
EVIDENCE FROM ‘BURNSIDE’ PRIMARY**

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## **On-going Objectives**

One ongoing objective for my activities in this school was:

- To expose some particularities of how children's participation in the planning, design, and change of outdoor spaces gets narrated.

## **Strategy**

To do this, I worked with the metaphor of 'researcher-as-virus'. I sought out and found a particular 'host' schools. I hoped to get evidence by using methods that invited participation by others (children, teachers, etc) in the actual process of planning and design but I needed to get involved in more traditional research methods as a 'cover' for gaining the trust of the children and teachers before I could do this. My role in eliciting participation in the research was catalytic interventionist in style (see Section B, Chapters 9 & 11). It involved:

- tracking the action as it occurred in playgrounds to uncover the diversity of rich meanings that can be ascribed to children's activities in school grounds. This sometimes involved playing with the children, going on guided tours of the school grounds where the children led me around, or working on changes to the school site itself with them.
- tracking the participatory approaches to involving children in changing the school grounds, particularly action when children's agency is involved in the planning, design, maintenance and change of out-door spaces. This involved 'being there' sometimes as an assistant, when landscape architects or artists were at work with children, or actively doing the work myself involving the children in design and planning processes and seeing a project to completion by getting other adults involved.
- evaluating projects after they are completed by getting the children to record their experiences of participation according to Hart's ladder (see main text p127) or through the writings and auto-photography of children. I left blank diaries and easy to use (disposable) cameras in some schools that promised to return documentary evidence of their work.
- contextualising the stories I collect as they unfold in the cultural milieu in which they are found and integrating perspectives from other authors work in the construction of this text.

### **Role-Positioning Options / Operational Positionings:**

During the course of my visits to schools I took on many different researcher roles. Taken together they amount to a kind of flaneurie. I list them here.

- ‘Participant Observer’ / ‘Pseudo Anthropologist’ especially in the playground but also over lunches and at meetings.
- ‘Critical Friend’, ‘Lover’ and ‘Accomplice’ with my girlfriend who ended up on the staff of the school I visited a lot.
- ‘Confidant’ / ‘Interested Adult’ / (non-disciplinarian / detective / story-writer) with the children. I would tell children I was writing stories about children’s experiences of change in playgrounds.
- ‘Action Researcher’ with the staff and head teacher in the school and with the Ranger service (see chapter 9 & 11, main volume). This role was the most acceptable from their perspective. I felt I could give something back to them if I was helpful to their own needs for answers to the difficulties they experienced. I gave some ‘inservice’ sessions to staffs I visited on my initial hunches, observations.
- ‘Environmental Psychologist’ ‘Geographer of Childhood’s Places’ with some of my data.
- ‘Post-structuralist Deconstructor’ with all the text I generated, with my own writing, and with my own readings. I was ethically inspired to give ‘voice’ to those who remain unheard in planning, design, and maintenance of outdoor spaces. My focus remained on how children’s participation can be narrated in new ways that allow for open interpretations.
- ‘Reflexive Self’ with my own diaries and journals.

## **Some Methods**

Some of the methods I used over the course of my study of school grounds changes involved visits to schools, to playgrounds while the children were there, phone calls to ‘activists’ who were instrumental in making changes to school grounds, statistical analyses of schools who won awards. Other methods I used included:

- Photography: Photographs taken by myself or by the children which I use in this text or which I used to catalyse interviews (see chapter 10, main volume)
- Drawings made by the children which I used as ‘starters’ for interviews
- My own mapping involving note taking while observing playgrounds using larger maps
- Sitting in on school council meetings in three schools (see ‘Children’s Participation in Other Areas of Education and Schooling’, main volume ) and interviewing members of these councils
- Interviewing monitors , janitors, playground helpers, principals and teachers.
- Telephone interviews of some parents when they were involved
- Interviews with some outside agency ‘consultants’ who help schools with school grounds planning
- Children's documentary evidence of planning and design - their maps, models, etc
- Diaries, commentaries, written by children who had been active in grounds changes
- In-service sessions to teaching staffs .. using slides of their own school grounds ‘in use’ and of other school grounds developments (2 schools requested this)
- Autobiographical reminiscences of school grounds changes by teachers.

## **Methodology Restated**

My version of action research will be a pragmatic catalytic interventionist model (Catalytic Participatory Research, see Chapters 9 & 11, main volume) performed for you through the production of this image-text (see Chapter 10). I would find occasions and events for intervening in the culture of a place with a view to getting opportunities for researching children’s participation in change. It required that I try out my own ideas in involving children in participating in change. A few layers of reflection have been necessary: I needed to be aware of my own role as agent for change while at the same time trying to research the children’s participation in change. These arenas of work go hand in hand. They are linked to each other in a typically action research approach. The pictures frame up these events and

give food for thought for readers who collaborate in retelling the story of my own collaborative activities.

[action research] may be instigated by an individual, but its momentum is towards collaboration, because the emphasis on social interactions and interpersonal relationships has the effect of drawing other participants into the research process. (Somekh, 1995, p342)

Somekh (1995, p340) reminds us that action research begins with a felt need to change a situation. The practical question arose from my own past work as a practising teacher: *how best can we involve children in making changes to their local environments?*

It makes all the difference in the world whether a thinker stands in personal relation to his problems, in which he sees his destiny, his need, and his higher happiness, or can only feel of grasp them impersonally with the tentacles of cold, prying thought. (Nietzsche cited in Passmore, 1968, p470)

My own attempts at initiating change in a school led me to a tacit understanding of how projects can get quashed in school cultures but I discovered that in attempting to document the children's own use of the school grounds that they were already participating in a multitude of changes to the school site every day in the way they organised loose objects found in the playground, the way they administered the loose play objects provided for them by teachers, in the way they appropriated places for different activities. The children's abilities to organise and control their own spaces independent of adults (except for the fairly 'hands off' approach by playground helpers) demonstrated a level of participation that largely unnoticed and unappraised by adults. Children's self-initiated projects are posited on rung number seven on Hart's ladder (see Chapter 13, main text).

### *Personal Biographic Background*

I had personal experience of attempting to change school grounds sites while working as a teacher. I had attempted the installation of a school wildlife area in the last school in which I taught with local help from businesses and children's participation in design. Once I had left the school, the project folded and the pit excavated for the pond was filled in within four weeks. In one way my activism was 'buried' with this project; now I had a chance to inquire into the processes of change in school grounds again. I could exhume and breathe life back

into this area of personal interest. This ‘situational understanding’ (Elliot, 1993, p66-70) gives me a background in the culture and values found in schools among teachers but unlike Somekh (1995, p342) I do not think it necessary to maintain an uncritical and static groundedness in this culture to be part of an action research initiative of the poststructural variety. In post-realist research I give up naive attempts to represent the world as a true reality, in favour of re-presenting the world ever anew for new readership. Validity is to be found herein if I expose knowledge generation as a problem, if I foster new perspectives in my work, if my work is politically motivated to make a difference to some locale by putting some discourse under erasure by the way I bring ethics and epistemology together (Lather, 1991). The research activity is about engaging in the flow of cultural process which is unavoidable regardless of one’s choice of method. Methods become incidental to the drive for ethical positioning. And so my methods were many. The main reasoning for the choice of methods is the pragmatic one of how best to advance the multiple aims of the research: the discovery of and assessment of participatory approaches involving children in changing a local environment and the narration of this story within a readable performative text. Some of my research methods were strategic ‘covers’ for gaining access to the nuts and bolts of a culture (which turned out to be revelatory in exposing children’s own initiated participation in change in the everyday setting of playtime); others are methods I tried out in my quest for involving children myself as an activist for change.

I began by thinking that I could act as a catalyst in initiating change. I had a few strategies in mind to get into a position to do this: I would get to know the school and children by doing some interviewing of the children about their locale and their school grounds; I would do some participant observation in the school grounds as a friendly observer-inquirer who would need guidance from the children about how things worked in the playground; later I could convene staff that were interested, be an advocate for the children’s views in their absence at meetings, and offer ideas for getting children participating in the changes if the teachers were willing. I thought this ‘part activist-part researcher’ role would be a fruitful one. As it turned out, I became more involved in activating a couple of projects to effect change in the grounds than I had anticipated. I would be involved in working directly with the children in classrooms as an agent for change in involving the children in planning, designing, and working on a couple of projects and I would be a focal point for communication between different interested parties: the teachers, the children, some

volunteers (The Prince's Trust), and the Local Authority. The narrative of my involvement in the school takes a personal turn when a teacher I had met in another school, called Sarah, moved into the school in question. I had the experience of finding my personal life inextricably bound up with my life as a PhD researcher. As I pull away from the school as researcher-activist, Sarah and some other staff take on the job of planning the next phases of the plans for change to the school grounds. Our friendship became more than platonic and we were later engaged to be married. The consequences of this for my research are many: I was finding Sarah's thinking about the school grounds changes to be revealing, yet she is so much more than a 'respondent' in the research; our deep friendship made for a collegial attitude to making changes to the school grounds which requires even greater attention to my need for reflexivity on the issues presented. The feeling of having 'gone native' in the field is an experience we all need to foster if a partial, embodied, positioned approach to research is taken up. There is no 'out there' and 'in here' when it came to being involved in this school with and among the people I knew; in research processes we are always native: it is what we do with our native awareness that counts. Any requirement of having to manage one's subjectivity with reference to the data seemed nonsensical. I was invited to the social gatherings of the staff and we would invite the staff to part of our marriage celebrations. I felt I had involved myself in a participatory way with the needs of those with whom I did the research. I needed to maintain a difficult position (discussed in Chapters 1-8, main volume) where ironic ambivalence towards the needs of others may be necessary for an active deconstruction of one's own world view to occur while alongside this, a compassionate advocacy for the needs of those with whom one is doing the research is also needed. Even in conversations between myself and my then fiancée, there is a necessarily reflexive approach to what is discussed. 'Data collection' and 'homelife' may seem to make for an uneasy partnership but this is the stuff of participant observation within participatory action research when done in an engaged manner. In a way, all of the research is 'participant observation of oneself and others' within a culture. Similarly, since all research is action of some sort that brings about effects the field (even if it is the field of texts), all of it is a form of action research (which can take place in one's mind, in the office, in the home or in the school) (see Gauthier, 1992, p193). In that we need to reflect on our own practice, this holds true for all reflective practitioners in any discipline. The difference, in that one can be found in participatory action research, is that the participatory culture is embraced and encouraged rather than managed, controlled or excluded from elements of research processes (see my

discussion of Peshkin, 1988, and Heshusius, 1994, Chapter 9, main volume ).

### **Getting to Know The School, The Children, The Locale**

In the beginning, I set about just being around the school, getting to know staff and children. I chose the school out of some five others that I visited initially, because I had been made welcome enough to feel I could return regularly and get relationships going. I made arrangements to do some interviews on the themes of their special places and playtime in the school grounds: I wanted to discover what was going on in the school playground and to check out what previous authors (Adams, 1994; and Titman, 1994) had already been saying about school grounds. In particular, what Sobel (1993) had discovered about den, hut, and fort construction seemed an interesting angle on what children might want from a play space. It was an initial trawl of the territory of the academic and child worlds. I had an intuitive sense that there was something to be gained by combining what was known about children's experiences of making their own spaces and the moves to make changes in school grounds. I was also keen to spend time in the grounds, to get to know what spaces were already popular with the children and to get some initial thought on the school ground culture.

#### *Profile of a School (Burnside Primary)*

A quick profile of one particular school will give the context for the study I conducted there. We shall call this school 'Burnside Primary' for the sake of anonymity. Burnside School was a suburban primary situated in a fairly large town (population approx. ?) in central Scotland. It was quite large in Scottish terms having some 500+ children. The space within and without the school is in demand with so many children. The school site itself spans a burn which flows underneath a portion of the building and cuts through the school playgrounds. The division created outdoors is used to define spaces for children from different classes for play time. The burn is fenced by a high wire mesh for safety as the burn runs very high in floods. There is a public footpath through the grounds which is open access at all times of the day and night. The grounds are used daily after hours for dog walking, local access and by teenagers who drink there and sometimes cause vandalism to the windows, leave broken bottles and sometimes used condoms which have to be cleaned up by the janitor. These incidents rarely impact on the curriculum in any coherent way. There is no plan to integrate these potential learning incidents into the school curriculum.



The job of the school is traditionally defined (as in most schools) by the desire to get through the traditional requirements for teaching children ‘the basics’. Before I began my work with the school there were some large areas of tarmac, and grass as the play areas. The grass is inaccessible to the children when wet (which amounts to nearly 80% of the school year).

#### *A School Grounds Committee of Children*

The teachers organised a playground committee of children from the 18 classes in an effort to discuss changes. Democratic process in a school this size proved very difficult; teachers are not easily ‘freed up’ to attend meetings with children; children are not all capable of communicating to their peers about the intricacies of what can be achieved; teachers in individual classes are not in the habit of encouraging this kind of cross-school, communication. School assemblies had a celebratory culture but this did not allow for discussion or consultation between adults and children; usually the decisions made by adults are communicated to the children and rules are laid down to insure the children are safe and easily controlled. By comparison with the smaller schools, this larger school ran into difficulties in communicating ‘whole-school’ issues and getting school-wide awareness going about the plans for changes. Mostly, individual teachers took it upon themselves through the direction of one teacher who took on the role of playground development coordinator.

#### *The Interviews*

I interviewed some 40 children about their access to local outdoor spaces, their special places, if they had any, and about their play experiences. Group interviews were used as a ‘focus group’ exercise; it allows for the influences of some group members comments on others responses. Focus group processes also enable the interview to be catalysed: they can enable a ‘group conversation’ to get going. For my purposes I convened a random selection of three to four boys or girls in each focus group for each class level in the school except primary fives due to unforeseen circumstances. There were five groups of boys and five groups of girls respectively (Primary 7, 6, 4, 3, 2). I then convened one mixed interview to get a catalysis of comments between the boys and the girls in primary six. I tried to find out about:

- their general ‘home range’ behaviour

- their secret places, dens, bush houses etc
- about their use of the public play parks in the area
- about their sense of any gender differences in their play time experiences

### *The Interviews Narrated*

Each of the group interviews have been synthesised to make for ease of readership. Some quotations are interspersed.

#### **Primary Seven Boys (Aged 11+)**

*'We sometimes play Man-Hunt right across the town.'*

A group of boys will search for a smaller group of boys around the network of streets. One boy mentions that he once walked to [local large town some 6 miles away - name deleted] because he was in a bad mood. Another boy mentions that he sometimes goes off with his dog and no one else for up to 5 hours across the upland hills nearby. When asked about the differences between girls and boys when they play they said that *'girls talk all the time; boys do more athletic things'*. They thought that girls tended to shop a lot and that they were no good at football. When asked about the prospect of moving up to secondary school, they mentioned that there was the prospect of meeting new people, doing new things and having new opportunities for sport.

#### **Primary Seven Girls (ages 11+)**

When asked what they did on sunny days, they told me that they would sunbathe while the boys would play football as usual. They didn't think that they were interested in having a 'secret place' anymore like younger children do. The most important activity for them outdoors was sitting on the swings and 'hanging about' ... *'talking about boys - sexy boys!'* *The boys would go away and play football; then we'd talk about them and say if we thought they'd got good bums or not'*. At the weekends they listed visiting each others homes, listening to music or drawing as favourite pastimes. I asked them if they would be chatting when drawing: *'Definitely! We never shut up!'* she replied. Another girl thought that gang huts were a bit babyish *'like Star Wars'*; another girl mentioned that her father was *'into Star Wars'* and that he was still like a baby too. When asked what were the best things about moving up to the secondary system, they said: *'The best things are the boys! Definitely the boys coming from the other villages and ahh that [giggle].'*

### **Primary Six Boys (Aged 10+)**

These boys spent time on their bicycles, playing with computers, golf and going swimming. Their favourite outdoor pastime was *'going up the glen'* where they had been *'hundreds of times'* but usually in the summer. They said initially that they didn't have any secret places but one boy mentions that he and his friend 'go up the hill where there's a broken tree with a lot of roots showing; you can go inside and you can see all of [name of small town deleted]. They mentioned that they had encountered some dangers in their travels: *'people drinking and smoking, smashed bottles'*. Another boy didn't like having to go and buy chips for the family in the evenings. They remember having more secret place and huts when they were a bit younger.

### **Primary Six Girls (aged 10+)**

These girls met regularly in the local parks. They had a favourite park where they met most often and spent usually up to an hour there. They sometimes spent time playing hide and seek. They often met indoors too when they would play board games, card games and computer games. They had no secret places but they had a tree from which they liked to watch the golfers over the wall. Another girl has a tree house where there are many spiders. They *'just talk'* there. They liked going up a back country lane with their friends because it was quiet. They mention going to a local wood *'to get away from it all - we catch tadpoles in the pond'*. One girl mentions that her mother doesn't like her going in *'the woodie'*. Last night they had a water fight between the boys and the girls in the park. They talked about their mothers impositions on them in terms of time and access:

*'Sometimes Mums are terrible protective!'*

*'They just care about ye though.'*

*'Like when you're playin' in the front of the car they say "Don't touch anythin".'*

*'Once a car was on fire and my Mum came out in her short nightie and bare feet and grabbed me and brought me in; I was dead embarrassed.'*

*'They bring you in too early like at 8:30 or 9:30.'*

*'I woke up at ten o'clock last night and it was still bright.'*

The places they think are unsafe are the roads.

### **Primary Four Boys (Aged 9)**

These boys used a map (which they had made in class) to point out the places we discussed in the interviews. Their favourite places were their own houses and a local street. They picked their houses because they can play computers there. They picked the local street because that is where they play most of the time. Their favourite outdoor places beyond their street was the local park. They enjoy climbing on play equipment, climbing through bushes and playing hide and seek. They have a 'gang hut' which they took over from some children who used it previously. They have many 'secret places' where they can hide when playing in the bushes. They enjoy taking short cuts.

### **Primary Four Girls (Age: mostly just turned 9)**

While their favourite outdoor place is the park, they spend more time on their local street where they rollerblade and play hockey. They must be back home by 6-8pm in the evening. They can go off for an hour or so and not tell where they've been sometimes. They invariably 'check in' with their parents after an hour. They only cross the main road sometimes. They are not allowed to go into the woods on their own. They cross the road on their own only without permission. They like ghost stories.

### **Primary Three Boys (Aged 7-8)**

These boys think that they spend almost equal amounts of free time playing football and playing on their computers. They have dens in their back gardens, the field, and other sites. Their parents do not know where the dens are usually. One boy claimed he had been to Stirling and back on his own by bicycle; another boy said he had walked some three miles to another village and back on his own once. About half of them seemed free to go and come to the shops and across the main street unaided. Some of them will use the lights to get across. All of them would like to be able to cross the road easier. Some of the boys go *'up the glen'* regularly. All of them think that at least *'some girls are stupid, that they do stupid things'* and that they like to play with *'stupid toys like Barbies'*.

### **Primary Three Girls (Aged 7)**

The girls mention visiting friends, going to the park, playing outside on bikes, or play games in the house. If it's really sunny they will play in a paddling pool in the back garden. They play skipping, football, and pretend games sometimes in mixed groups. They have a 'gang hut' shed in the back garden which their parents support by buying posters to decorate it. No one had ever crossed the main road without the lollipop lady or the lights at the pedestrian crossing. The furthest they had walked on their own tended to be from the house to the school. Once escorted by parents their journeys by foot and by bicycle were very much extended. One girl has a friend that wants to be a boy. None of them want to be a boy, but one girl says she likes *'their games'*. She thinks *'boys' games are better because you get to kick the ball about'*.

### **Primary Two Boys and Girls (Aged 6-7)**

Both boys and girls mentioned sand and water play as favourite pastimes. They also played with footballs, played pretend games like 'cooking'. They all liked hide and seek particularly in the long grass. Their parents brought them to the local park. The girls tended to keep off the street but sometimes played on back paths on their bikes where their parents knew where they were. The boys travelled further on their bikes. The boys mentioned climbing whereas the girls did not. They all had dens of some description.

## Interview Findings

The interviews are best given an airing in narrative form following each of the class levels which correspond to age levels broadly. First, I give a tabular form of the results about home range behaviour for cycling alone and walking alone. This data is derived from asking the children about what the extremities of the distance from home was for their trips. When there were discrepancies between their responses I took the most common result or an average of the answers. A second table shows the differences in the times they reported they were required home by their parents/guardians. Both of these sets of data give an impression of the effect of age and gender on access to the outdoors.

	<b>HOME RANGE</b>			
	<b>Cycle Alone</b>		<b>Walk Alone</b>	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
<b>Primary 7</b>	Up to 8 miles	Don't usually bother	Up to 6 miles	Mainly locally in town's parks
<b>Primary 6</b>	Not available	Up to 8 miles	Up to 6 miles; 'up the glen'	3 miles
Primary 5	interviews --	not -----	conducted-	-----
<b>Primary 4</b>	Occasionally beyond the town	Anywhere in the town	Mainly in the town but also the local fields	Cross the main road in the town rarely
<b>Primary 3</b>	6 miles	Within the town only	'Up the glen'	'Near to the glen' and in the town generally
<b>Primary 2</b>	To a friend's house; to the park (5-10 mins)	near the house only	To the parks alone and escorted	To the park (but usually escorted)

Fig. B.1. This table shows the extremities of the children's home ranges with the respective differences for age and gender.

### *Gender Differences*

It is interesting to note the general decrease in extensive trips being made by girls once they reach the age eleven in Primary 7. These girls' interests seemed very focussed on their interest in boys - an interest that was not often reciprocated by the boys of the same age<sup>1</sup>.

By age nine, the boys were beginning to be allowed to cycle beyond the town (Primary 4), while the girls were seemingly still only allowed within the town's boundaries. Similarly, the boys of the same age were crossing the main road and getting out and about in the fields, the girls were only rarely crossing the main road on their own. By primary seven, the girls have gained a particular interest in the opposite sex which seems to dominate their outdoor activities and their locations for social gatherings. Their seeming limited 'roam behaviour' in primary seven could be part of this new found interest but there may be other factors. Perhaps these girls were beginning to come under pressure from their parents to remain nearer to home now that they were older or perhaps there is a peer group pressure to hang around with their own age group in locally distinct groups. Other social pressures on girls to conform seemed apparent even at aged seven. Girls were already distinguishing between boys' and girls' games at this age. At aged six less apparent role definitions were in operation and mixed play was more common.

### *Age Differences*

We can see the effects of age on home range behaviour in the above table. By Primary 2 (age 6), the children were negotiating their way around their back gardens, their local street, and in some cases, the local park alone. By age 11 (Primary 7) the children were travelling up to eight miles by bicycle to nearby towns, and villages to visit their parks or to visit relations. It must be said that these trips were the exceptions and that most of the children's travels took them more locally. As with my findings from children's home range behaviour (see Appendix A) these results show how children build their home ranges into increasingly broader expanses as they got older (especially around the age of ten in primary five and six) but there is a fall of in interest in using their increased freedom to roam among girls in primary seven as discussed above.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis and Jones (1997) find a similar pattern in children's use of outdoor space. 'When girls did go out, "hanging out with their friends" was a more common activity than active pursuits such as bike riding or playing in the park' (p355).



### *The Glen'*

Many children spoke about 'going up the glen. The glen comprised of a network of paths along an occasionally steep route beside a stream which has a few waterfalls. This was a more frequented spot for the boys; we may presume that the girls movements were more restricted by their parents because when the girls are allowed to 'roam' more freely they take advantage of the opportunity. Another interpretation of this could be that the 'experience of the wild' as epitomised by visits to local places free from the restrictions of the built environment may be the domain of the male childhood. This discourse of adventure is enhanced for boys more than girls through 'action man' toys and so many media images that portray the active male in outward bound settings more than their female counterparts.

### *Secret Places, Dens Huts, Bush Houses*

I collate the comments about the children's creation of secret outdoor places, special outdoor places or dens, huts, forts, and 'gang huts'. The large choice of words used to describe these places is a reflection of the diversity of children's language found in distinct locales. I asked them if they *'Ever remember having a secret place? or I would say 'Tell me about secret or special places'*. (NOTE: p4g represents a 'Primary Four Girl')

#### P4 Boys (ages 7-8)

'We have a gang hut.' (p4b)

'Wee bushes .. when you're runnin away fra someone ... climb up.' (p4b)

'I dug a big hole .. it took days and days .. you can (go in) and cover yourself up with leaves and twigs.' (p4b)

'A tree house (in the ) fields up the back.' (p4b)

'Through the Devon .. short cuts.' (p4b)

#### P3 Boys (ages 6-7)

'I have a den in my back garden with my brother .. you have to have a password to get into it ... my sister: we don't want her in.' (p3b)

'I made a hut in the field. I have things in it. ... bits of metal, bits of wood, sports things.' (p3b)

'At the back of the shed .. I made a den.' (p3b)

'I got a tree in the back garden .. I built a hut and put a roof over it.' (p3b)

P2 Boys (ages 5-6)

'I have a den in the bushes at the back of my garden.'

P7 Girls (ages 11-12)

'I was four or five .. it was a big tree with a hole in it' (p7g)

P6 Girls (ages 10-11)

'There's a tree in my back garden that I climb up.' (p6g)

P4 Girls (ages 8-9)

'The street near my home .. because it's smooth for rollerblading.'

P3 Girls (ages 7-8)

'There's these bushes with wee gaps. We've got stuff in there like pictures.' (p3g)

'I go underneath the piano.' (p3g)

'We've got a sofa and there's a hole in it.' (p3g)

'The shed.' (p3g)

'There's a tree that you can climb up.' (p3g)

P2 Girls (ages 6-7)

'Behind my Wendy house.' (p2g)

Other children mentioned the following places (below) as their 'favourite places'. They are all public outdoor places. These mentions come entirely from the girls whose favourite place were both 'secret places' (above) and outdoor public ones (mainly the parks and streets).

'The "back road".' (p4g)

'The 'back road'.' (p6g)

'[name of park deleted] Park' (p4g)

'Up [name of park deleted] Park.' (p6g)

' [name of park deleted] Park.' (p6g)

'[name of park deleted] Park.' (p6g)

### *Discussing Dens, Forts, Gang Huts*

For some children their ‘dens’ were not fully ‘secret’. Older boys tended to speak of ‘huts’ and ‘dens’ which are counted here as their ‘special place’. Primary 4 girls (ages 7-8) also tended to name more public outdoor places that were within view than the boys: the parks, and the roads were favourite places. Some girls also named each others’ homes as ‘favourite places’ when asked about dens, and secret places. Taken in conjunction with the statistics for home range, we can find a spatially different childhood being experienced by girls: it is more supervised, less distant from the home and spatially more in the public domain.

### *Qualities of a good den of ‘gang hut’*

I asked the children about what attributes a good ‘den might have: *What is important about having a secret / special place? What does it have to be like?* I collect the features of ‘good gang huts’ the headings ‘Quiet, Houselike, Natural, Private with Views’ below:

#### **(a) Quiet**

‘quiet ... a place for picnics’ (p7g)

‘I played with my doll when I was younger ... played “tea”.’ (p7g)

‘You can see into Cochrane Park (from my tree) and the golfers.’ (p6g)

‘The ‘back road’ .. it’s quiet.’ (p6g)

#### **(b) Houselike**

‘I like my Wendy house because my grandpa built it. It’s getting tiles put on it. You can go inside and play with the toys. We make toast, burgers, chips. I read my reading books to myself.’ (p2g)

‘Like a house .. and a hole for a window and a ladder you can climb up.’ (p4b)

‘A good roof, good walls so it won’t collapse.’ (p3b) [he used a hammer and nails to put the roof on himself]

‘Bushes are good because you can climb up and go jumpin’ oer them .. excitin’. (p6b)

#### **(c) ‘Natural Materials**

‘You can climb up and use the leaves to hide yersel and ahh that.’ (p6b)

‘It’s quite bright .. I cover the ground with grass.’ (p2b)

‘It has to be a good hiding place (like) in the field where the crops are.’ (p3b)

#### **(d) Private with Views**

‘My mum and Dad hardly ever go round there and they never knew I had a den. Once I made

a hut and I wasn't allowed to keep it up ... when they found out about it I got a row.' (p3b)  
'We talk about lots of things like going into our rooms and playing with the toys and what we're going to do.' (p3b)  
'You can climb up the tree and see over the wall.' (p2b)

### **School Grounds Use Under Human Influence, 'Built Environmental' Influence, and 'Natural /Seasonal' Influences**

Aside for the larger influences of 'being allowed' to go on the grass at certain times of the year, there are obvious seasonal influences that come into play when children are at play. A list of built environment features and a similar list of natural features that seemed to serve specific purposes for children's activities in one school grounds is given in Appendix C. Rules changed over time about where and when children were to line up, be found playing, with what and under what constraints. Kerbs, manhole covers, ramps, bollards all provided different functions for children's play and social life. The arrival of new or fallen leaves, blackberries, and 'cover' in the bushes made for changes in the children's games. Nature and culture intermingled in the ever emerging ludic landscape created by the children. The activities undertaken in school grounds are site specific, local, culturally distinctive interactions of people and place although many games had common cultural formations. The inclusion of a sequence of photographs (below) serves to explicate the imaginative content of children's play while also revealing how places only exist as interpretation by someone somewhere, sometime. Spaces are always culturally acquired fictional places that are not static but are ever changing, being viewed through different eyes in different places at different times of the year by children of different ages.

*Places are processual texts inscribed by the place identifications of these children that emerge over time rather than being fixed or static. Places 'become' in a coupled way with and in the identifications the groups of children make in socially central sites.*

### *Influences of Behaviour and the Built Environment on Playground Life*

Here I list of some of the places (in bold) in the *built environment* with their associated uses as sites for activity gleaned from observations.

#### *Places and Their Uses*

- **the kerbs and pavements** used for playing 'Bulldog' (a banned game) that allows for larger numbers to run from one side to the other;
- **fences or walls** for convening at the beginning of playtime;
- **corners** for hiding;
- **elevated or easily demarcated areas** that allow smaller groups to gather in a 'safe zone' or den during 'tig';
- **places that are dry and are good viewing points** for sitting in / on while eating lunch;
- **less noisy or less busy places or corners** for telling secrets;
- **specially chosen flat surfaces on the tarmac** for drawing on with chalk;
- **centrally located 'performance areas'** for skipping or rope jumping;
- **noticeable differences in flat surfaces (like manhole covers)** that were suggestive of places for 'dens' in tig or demarcations for goal posts; open dry, grassy areas for football (tarmac is used with a smaller ball when the grass is 'out of bounds');
- **any area that is 'out of view'** for playing manhunt, 'hidee' (hide and seek);
- **any steps or ramps** for running up or jumping off;
- **gateways, porches, entrances, recesses in the wall** for convening, playing imaginative games, dramas, or playing with toys (like Tamagochis: virtual pets);
- **lamp posts, signposts, and other poles** for swinging around called the 'dizzy pole';
- **a bollard, designed for keeping out cars** is used for leapfrog.

### *Natural and Seasonal Influences*

Places are processual texts inscribed by the place identifications of these children that emerge over time rather than being fixed or static:

- the coming of the blackberries provides objects for throwing and catching
- younger children used the berries for making hand markings which served as stamps that allowed the owner to gain access to dens;
- fish were observed in the burn from a viewing point at the fence;
- in times of high water the burn became a site of focus and interest; the water was compared to Coka-Cola when in torrent;
- dry days in the summer provided dust for kicking up;
- autumn provided leaves for throwing and playing with;
- frosty days yielded frost-covered fences that can be investigated - the frost can be gathered on your glove and eaten, as could snow;
- icy puddles were for sliding on;
- odd stray sticks ( not permitted by supervisors) could be played with in the mud for drawing with;
- protruding stones can be pried out of position over some days by using matchstick sized twigs as diggers by younger children;
- mud slopes can be used as dirt tracks for toy cars and trucks (mainly by the boys);
- marks on the tarmac put there by some construction vehicles earlier served as routeways for running around;
- bushes and trees are used as focal points in games and for hiding behind and climbing on;
- trees for running around and stake supports for trees are used for squeezing between;
- slopes are used for running down;
- an 'out of bounds' mound is used for standing on and viewing from as well as playing 'King of the Castle'.

## **An Observational Study in Burnside Primary**

In this school I spent time looking informally at the 'goings on' in the playground. I took no structured checklist into the play area but, instead, took a 'blank map' of distinct areas of the playground. I watched and took note of activities and located them on the maps, writing short descriptions of what I thought was going on. I drew in features on the map when it seemed they were significant for the purposes of the games or activities undertaken by the children. When a game or activity was unknown to me I went up to the children and asked them to describe what they were doing.

The playground was divided up between different age groups: primary 1 and 2, primary 3 and 4, primary 5 -7. In each area, there were different features that served to denote, for the children where they were supposed to go and where they were not allowed to go. Access to 'the bars' (parallel metal bars for swinging off) was a new 'privilege' for older ones. The 'burn' (stream) served as another boundary between younger and older children. The sequence of three distinct sites was a definitive physical and ritualistic journey from the front of the school right around to the back. In dry weather, other areas of grass adjoining the different play areas became 'in bounds', which further enhances play opportunities and resulted in different games being played. It became apparent to me over some days doing this that there were distinct 'focal points' in the playground that were structurally useful to the children for the purposes they had in mind. Once the purposes were understood, potential sites became easier to predict and spot. These were the micro topological structuring of the playground that resulted in these sites having social centrality for the children.

In this school the children reported only having one 'thing' to play on - 'the bars'. In fact this was the only piece of apparatus provided for the sole purposes of play. Yet, children's use of, what to an observer may have been seen as a fairly barren site, was effectively used for a multitude of playful and social interactions by the children. The playground supervisors, whose eyes were trained to pick out the accidents and brewing incidents, were looking for different things to me. (See plates F.4 & F.5, Appenfix F, p9).

One playground supervisor attested, like so many other adults, that 'children do not know how to play anymore'. They felt they needed to be shown 'how to play'. In some schools

the supervisors actively played with the children to demonstrate some games, to manage their play in a more controlled way or to show them some traditional games. These different approaches to play: the restrictive and interactive approaches are inspired by discourses about what needs and problems children are experiencing rather than on the belief in the ability of children to determine their own needs or solve their own problems.

### **A Day Doing Participant Observations in Burnside Primary**

Some authors recommend using the ‘least adult role’<sup>2</sup> possible in observing children’s games. In my early efforts to discover the best way to get in touch with the children’s cultures I wanted to study, I also intentionally participated in some of the games the children played. The first game I played was ‘Man-hunt’, a game mainly played by boys that involves a larger group of children searching for a smaller group or an individual. The group of children playing the game were all boys from the same class. I also took part in a large game of ‘Bulldog’ which I later discovered was an ‘illicit game’. I was the centre of attention for much of the activity in both games. During Bulldog, other children would come up and ask me if Bulldog was ‘my game’ and asked my permission to join in.

During both games I became aware that I was using my ‘adult body’ to evade them which allowed me to go faster than some but meant that I was less agile in a tight corner. In any event, I was noticeably different, in the clothes I wore, in my vocal tone, in what I said and how I said it, and in their memories and images they had developed from my activities around the school. As it turned out, playing with the children was a good exercise for my acquisition of a sort of ‘street cred’ or, in this case, ‘playground credibility’ which showed them that I was not a teacher. The boys seemed to try to get to know me better initially. they wished to know what team did I support and if I knew I looked a bit like John Collins, a famous football player.

As it turned out, I retreated to my car during one of the games as I felt uneasy in my ‘least adult role’. One boy had said: “You can go anywhere” during the game. For me this meant outside of the playground’s boundaries. I had a fair idea he didn’t mean outside the boundaries of the playground as the school rules defined it. In

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<sup>2</sup> See Mandell (1988) for a discussion of the relevant considerations.



effect I had used my privileges as an adult to effectively leave the playground proper and to go into the car-park where I sat into my car to escape. I let myself off the hook for breaching the implicit rules of the game, consoling myself with the reasoning that 'I had notes to write up in my notebook about the game before it slipped my mind'. In another way, I was letting myself and the children know that I was different. That, much as I and they might like, I was not one of them. I wanted their acceptance as something other than a teacher but I was unsure of what boundaries I wished to put in place of the traditional ones: that adults work and children play. As I sat in the car, I heard them calling for me. They wanted me. Perhaps they wanted ME on THEIR terms. I would be 'caught' in the game, manipulated, engrossed in their world: how could I function effectively as an 'educational researcher'? I returned to the playground. To my surprise, instead of being seen as an adult who abused my adult privileges, I was regarded as 'clever' in having eluded the other 'man hunters'; after all, they had said I could go anywhere. However, I was not the last caught. I had been tricked! They called me back *pretending* the game was over. So, I rejoined the game by running after the other boys who were still 'free'. I successfully caught one of them.

#### *Some Learning from Participation in Playground Games*

Games are generally 'owned' by 'leaders' or organisers. Access is given or withheld. On hearing that I was not prepared to accept the ascribed position of power, children interested in taking part went on to gain access by confirming with others that it was 'all right to join in'. On many other occasions, I was to notice the actions of these key gatekeepers of play and hear others' references to game ownership by individuals, gender specific groups, whole classes, and some strongly bonded friendship groupings.

'Bulldog Run' was one of these games that was not clearly defined as 'legal' or 'banned' by all staff, or playground assistants. Some teachers were definitely against it as a game and had actively discouraged it. In any case, when I played this game, I was in the liminal space (Foucault's heterotopic space) in which the children often found themselves. I would investigate the prevalence of confusion about what was permitted and what was not in later interviews and fieldwork.

In the 'heat of the moment' I had also possibly been party to the domination of part of the play space. It was here on the 'bulldog run' space that some of the girls usually skipped. During the game there had been a minor collision too. One 'passerby' had grazed her knee. We were engaged in large-scale group movement across the playground. Wasn't I just like many of those 'boys' who are consistently cited in discussions on playgrounds as dominant? Didn't I, like the publications suggested, neglect to consider who else might be around and implicitly expect others, like the girls who skipped, to give way to our needs as males to take over the space? I discuss the gendering of play spaces in Appendix E.

### **Some Songs Recorded in the Playground**

These songs were all sung by girls; the sexually implicit and explicit content may be working to transmit possible identifications for girls and boys among child cultures in the playground though some of the girls reported not having much clue what the songs were about!

#### *Song 1*

Boys are rotten; made out of cotton  
Girls are sexy; made out of Pepsi  
Boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider  
Girls go to college to get more knowledge  
Icky acky poo poo - Boys Love You

#### *Song 2*

I went to a Chinese restaurant to buy a loaf of bread  
He wrapped it up in a five pound note and this is what he said:  
My name is Elvis Presley - girlfriend Lesley  
Sittin in the back seat drinkin Pepsi  
Had a baby ; in the navy  
Sittin in the back seat - nudge nudge nudge!