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Book Review

Outdoor Learning in the Early Years by Helen Bilton

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Outdoor Learning in the Early Years. 3rd Edition

Helen Bilton

Abingdon: Routledge (2010) pp. 272 Pbk. £21.99

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This is a well written text and the subject matter is timely as the importance of getting our youngest children outdoors more often could not be greater. However, it is a rather dense and comprehensive text and I am fairly sure that those who need to read it most will find it inaccessible. The early childhood education and care practitioners working on a daily basis with children from 0 – 8 are the key audience for anything on this subject. These practitioners work long hours on low pay and then fit their study in between this and their family lives. In the introduction the author suggests, quite rightly, that the book should be used to dip into, but given the dense text and the style of presentation it is not easy to do this. It appears to be written more for academics and those involved in undergraduate degree level studies to support their own academic writing rather than for practitioners. I am sure it will prove useful for students in such a way as it is comprehensive, well referenced and erudite. Sadly I doubt this third edition will have great impact on practice.

The text is divided into an introduction and then four sections. These sections are of unequal length and are subdivided under numerous headings such as 'fresh air', 'freedom', 'bikes' and 'gender'. This suggests how comprehensively the author covers the subject. Under each heading the author essentially tries to make a strong case for outdoor learning. For example under 'fresh air' she draws on scientific evidence to support the fact that a build-up of CO₂ plus heat adversely affects performance and in this case young children's ability to learn. I totally agree but I am not sure this really, or solely supports taking the learning outside. The first edition of this book came out in 1998 and I have been in a lot of airless classrooms since then. In all of the dozens of school visits I have made, particularly in the last eight years, I have seldom seen children learning outside. One could make a strong argument using the evidence cited about the effects of CO₂, to call for better ventilation in classrooms and in the current climate in Scotland, both physical and cultural, this might be more effective. In the majority of classrooms I have been in recently children are working under fluorescent lights and cannot even see the outside as the often already small windows are covered in 'work' or have blinds drawn to enable them to see the interactive whiteboard (even when this is not in use), and there is no direct access to the outdoors (usually a bleak piece of tarmac).

There are a number of interesting sections, quotable phrases, references and discussions linked to theory. One of these in chapter two is a discussion about 'redefining work and play' where the author sums up the problem succinctly saying, *'In some schools there seems to be this unhelpful view that children play at nursery but come to school to work; that children work in class and play at breaktime; that work is more important than play and play is the opposite to work'* (p.46). She goes on to highlight how play has been 'hijacked' by Western culture and government rhetoric and has become a multi-million pound industry. Structuring play and thus imposing our (adult) will redefines play as work so that it is no longer play. This important issue is then taken a step further suggesting that the element of work as a social contribution has been removed, so that jobs such as *'laying the table, cutting the grass or helping old ladies down the road'* (p.47) has all but disappeared. This is an aspect of the discussion about play in general but perhaps particularly outdoor play opportunities that are evidently lacking in the lives of Scottish children today, that could be vital in shaping practice in early childhood care and education settings.

In chapter six there is another short but important section on 'dispositions' where the author argues strongly that *'Knowledge, skills, feelings and desirable dispositions need to be fostered simultaneously'*, (p.149) and that the outdoor environment, especially where children can freely choose when to be out or in, fosters positive dispositions towards learning or with reference to Danish early years' education 'competences' such as creativity, resourcefulness or helpfulness. Figure 6.2 on page 149 provides a very useful list of these competences.

Another very quotable sentence from chapter four that could provide a useful 'motto' for an early years setting or a guiding principle for a policy on outdoor learning in the early years, is *"Ready made meals do not create cooks, ready-made environments do not create thinkers"* on page 93. This is a very comprehensive and useful text and really my only criticism of it is also around that as it is therefore quite dense text; there are so many sub-sections under headings that may not immediately attract the reader's attention; the black and white photographs are really too small and the tables and case studies likewise. I would really like to see a 'sister' book developed from this directed at the practitioner providing the key messages with the practical suggestions.