Research Note

The Golden Kiwi Childhood – Is it a Lottery?[1]

Colleen Lockie and Jocelyn Wright
Christchurch College of Education

ABSTRACT: *This paper reports on a survey of provisions for and children's access to outdoor play in full-day early childhood centres. Environmental features, routines, staffing, and the weather were found to be key factors influencing outdoor play. The findings indicate that outdoor play is better supported in centres that have a well planned environment, organised rosters, flexible routines, higher staffing ratios and a strong philosophy focussed on the child.*

INTRODUCTION

Research questions arise from a variety of places In this case facilitators in the professional development contract at Christchurch College of Education were interested to read the Hillary Commission report to the Ministerial Taskforce entitled *Getting Set For An Active Nation*. The report noted such issues as:

- Recreation and sport has become marginalised in education and is seen as the 'Cinderella' area of the curriculum
- Teaching is an overloaded profession that does not accord physical education, recreation and sport a priority in school life, despite the established importance of regular exercise and physical activity in improving health and well being.

The facilitators were moved to ask 'do these issues apply to early childhood?'

Around the same time another report, this time for the UK House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee inquiry into the early years, highlighted that programmes emphasising physically active play, self-initiated play and exploration are more worthwhile for young children rather than those programmes which focus on educational achievement. (POST Report, June 2000).

---

[1] This paper was published in full in the proceedings of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education Annual Conference 2001, Christchurch.

The facilitators began to share their perceptions that access to physically active play in centres had decreased over the years and began to wonder how much physically active play children in centres were actually getting. The early childhood sector regulatory requirements were consulted to ascertain what direction is given to early childhood providers in relation to outdoor access. Of all requirements there appeared to be only two that made the amount of time for outdoor access explicit. In the Education (Early Childhood) Regulations we found that a child can attend a centre without outdoor play space for no more than two hours on any one day. *Quality in Action* (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 24) provides one reflective question, which asks "How does our service ensure that children have free access to both indoor and outdoor play areas for most of the day?". When put together it can be argued that "most of the day" could be measured as the child's attendance minus two hours. We began to wonder how many centres allowed children free access between indoors and outdoors for most of the day.

Further discussion flowed about the key place in New Zealand culture of sport, environmental awareness and recreation in the outdoors. The relationship between early childhood experiences and activities of choice as adults was discussed. The questions posed were:

- If children have limited experience of the outdoors what will their adult activities of choice be?
- Will there be a culture shift away from outdoor recreation and sport in the next generation?'
- Would that matter?

New Zealand is regarded as a country where outdoor experiences are part of our culture, part of who we are, a cultural norm. We have a perception in New Zealand that sun, sea, grass and the outdoors are intrinsic to childhood – a golden kiwi experience. Is this a myth?

These values are encompassed in the aspirations for children on which *Te Whaariki* the early childhood curriculum is founded:

> To grow up as competent, confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. (Ministry of Education, 1996)

If early childhood is a training ground for later life, what are we going to support lifelong recreation in our unique New Zealand environment? Is the Golden Kiwi Childhood becoming a lottery – gained by chance rather than choice?

Stephenson (1999) has studied early childhood outdoor experiences in a New Zealand context to some extent. Alison discusses how New Zealand early childhood outdoor provision is very different from the provision described in most overseas research.

> Centres typically provide a wide variety of learning experiences, allowing children long periods of free flow access between indoor and outdoor environments, and staff taking an equally active role in both environments. (p. 4)

This view of New Zealand early childhood centres is one that is widely held, however, as professional development providers working in a diverse range of centres we wondered how accurate this description is. Stephenson's research also confirmed the significance of the potential learning that is possible outdoors. She found that the outdoor environment was particularly significant for some individuals and for some groups, particularly the four year old boys and the one year olds.

The research question was beginning to form. We decided we wanted to find out exactly what was happening for children in centres in our region in relation to free access to outdoor experiences - how much time in a day could children choose to be outdoors, and what factors influence the adults in providing this free access.

METHOD

Information was gathered by questionnaire sent to 180 full-day early childhood centres, excluding kindergartens and playcentres, within the Christchurch College of Education region. Questionnaires were returned from a total of 125 centres, a return rate of 70 percent. 75 respondents provided separate data for both their over two and under two programmes making the total number of responses 200.

Each centre was asked to complete the survey by indicating on a time-line the periods during their daily programme that children were either inside only, outside only or had free access to both areas. The time-line was presented in 15-minute intervals covering the span of a full day, from 8.00am until 6.00pm and allowed for recording under twos and over twos separately. When completing the time-line centres would be indicating their opening and closing times. The average hours of free access in the day could then be calculated to compare with the average hours the centres were open. Centres were also asked to identify the factors in their centre that made free access easy or difficult for their programme

to offer. Statistics on roll numbers, staff numbers and further comments were also asked for.

RESULTS

Initial analysis of the data involved separating responses for the various centre types as follows:

- 73 Under two's (included 1 under 2 only)
- 101 Over two's (included 27 over 2 only)
- 13 Mixed age
- 13 Sessional

The majority of the centres (93%) were open for six hours or more per day meeting the requirements for this research. Of these 49 percent of the respondents centres provided for over two year old children, seven percent for a mixed age range and 37 percent for under twos. The remaining seven percent of centres provided sessions of less than four hours in duration. As the intent of the research was to focus on free access in full-day centres it was decided not to consider the data for sessional centres in the analysis of results.

Access to Outdoor Play

The types of centre were further categorised according to the number of hours in the day the programme offered free access between indoors and outdoors. Initial analysis revealed that centres typically fell into four main categories, those that provided no free access, one to two hours, three to five hours and over five hours free access per day. The average amount of free access time was calculated and these averages became the sub-category label for defining the range of centre types.

The next step in the analysis of data involved calculating the average number of open hours for each centre category. Following this, calculations were made of the average number of hours each centre provided inside only or outdoors only time for each centre category.

For each centre category the total number of hours for each of free access, indoors and outdoors were calculated against the average hours per day to provide an overview of the average amount of time per day children have free access, indoor only play or outdoor only play. The main findings of interest were:

- 17 percent of under two centres and 6.5 percent of over two centres offered only indoor or outdoor times (no free access).
- 33 percent of under two centres offer less than two hours free access or no free access at all.
- All mixed age centres provided an average of 6.30hours free access per day. Therefore under two's in the mixed age centres surveyed are assured of having the maximum free access
- Nearly two thirds of over two's centres surveyed provide 6.30hours of free access compared to only one third of under two centres

Our findings indicate that the under two age group have the least access to the outdoors overall. Stephenson (1999) found that the one to two year olds were a group that were keen to be outdoors. These children became more engrossed in their play outdoors rather than indoors which Stephenson contributed to the 'open-ended' nature of the outdoor environment. If then, the majority of under two children in these centres are experiencing limited time outdoors, is their potential for learning also being limited? The same question could be asked in relation to four year old boys, the other group of children Stephenson identified the outdoors to be particularly important for.

The Schedule of the Day

Common patterns in the daily schedules of the centres were identified. It was noted that many of the periods of time centres had indicated as being either free access, indoor or outdoor were often one hour or less in duration. It appeared that the incidence of these periods increased as centres provided less free access time.

Generally centres that offer most of the day free access had the following pattern:

> 8.30am to noon free access After lunch free access until 5pm. Some also come indoors for morning and afternoon teal

Generally centres with no free access had the following pattern:

> 8.30am to lunch at noon (in-out-in-out-in) and repeated after lunch.

The remaining centres had a mix of the above two patterns including some free access and some restricted access.

Children in centres with limited free access were experiencing up to 11 adult driven transitions per day. Our concern is that this type of scheduling results in a high number of adult driven transitions for children rather than children being in control of making their own decisions. If the early childhood setting is seen as a

place where the values of society are passed on, what values are children learning when teachers implement transitions that involve teachers maintaining control and children needing to conform?

We found that where centre's provided less free access they tended to provide more frequent periods of outdoor-only access during the day. Breaking up the day into chunks of time reduces the opportunities for children to become engaged in their play, to explore, extend their ideas, practice new found abilities or form friendships. Offering outdoor only or indoor only periods also means that children find themselves in rather confined spaces. There is wide acceptance of the view that noisy, crowded situations cause stress in young children. Why do adults make it difficult for themselves and the children by limiting the available play space?

Factors that Made Free Access Easy or Difficult

The information supplied by centres about the factors that made free access easy or difficult within their centres was collated under six categories. Table 1 below shows the way factors were categorised into both easy and difficult factors. For example, factors in relation to staffing can be either an 'easy' factor when referring to higher ratios or 'difficult' when referring to covering breaks. Responses were tagged each time any of the factors were mentioned and were collated for each centre category.

The key findings relating to what made access easy or difficult were as follows:

- Overwhelmingly environmental features were identified as the factor that made free access easy in all centre types. It was also identified to a lesser extent as a factor that made free access difficult
- 'Routines' was a major factor identified for making free access difficult particularly in under 2's. For over 2's it rated the second most identified factor whereas for mixed age it was the least identified factor
- Staffing was consistently identified as a major factor that made free access easy as well as difficult across each centre type.

Weather was identified as a significant factor that made free access difficult. When referring back to the raw data it became evident that the group of centres that provided the most free access were more likely to have identified this factor.

Table 1: Classification of Factors that Made Access Easy or Difficult

Categories	**'Easy' factors**	**'Difficult' factors**
Philosophy and/or programme beliefs	Free choice Mixed age Flexibliliy Child choice	Planned activities Structured Programming constraints Not a priority
Staffing	Attitude Rosters/responsibilities Higher ratios Flexiblity Awareness of regulations. Parent help	Lower ratios Qualifications Cleaning Breaks Relievers
Weather	Climate of region Shelter Availability of correct clothing	Heat in summer Strong winds Exposed Dressing children Rain
Environment-al features	Visibility Doors/ramps/verandah Ease of traffic flow Entrance/design Shelter/shade Resources Surfaces	Design/ access Muddy Closed doors Narrow doors/clutter Steps No shelter Small size Shared with over 2s
Routines and regular events	Rolling snack breaks Flexibility Staff not tied to duties	Sleep Snack/Food breaks Structured Staff duties Staff tied up with routines Tidying up Meeting parents
Other	No strange adults can access Good planning of time Staff and children enjoy outdoors All ages together	Varying attendance hours Limited no's of children Children unwell/accidents City council resource consent (not before 9.00am) Under 2s needs

Respondents' General Comments

The general comments provided by the respondents further supported and explained the identification of factors identified (see Table 2).

Table 2. General Comments about Factors Influencing Access

	Easy Factors	Difficult Factors
Philosophy	Our centre philosophy is free choice, child-centered learning which promotes indoor/ outdoor choices that children make for themselves	Our preschool prepares children for school – schools have indoor and outdoor times, parents pay for the learning programme and not for their child to play all session in the sandpit.
Staffing	Well organised rosters worked by flexible staff	Many problems in supervision occur during staff break times, lunch, non-contact.
Weather	Of course when it's wet we are mostly indoors – though we do open as soon as the last spot falls and do go for walks with children in raincoats – with under 2 children it varies quite a bit	In winter putting hat, coats and gumboots on all children and then taking them off and so on – centre can get cold with door being open all the time.
Environment	The door is open during free access with staff positioned in both areas – indoors flows to outdoors.	Not easy access as children need to go through 4 gates – by the time everyone is ready the day is half over
Routines	Rolling morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea	Main limitations due to daily routines – planned activity times, mat-times, eating, sleeping

The comments provided by respondents support our conclusions that a well planned environment, organised rosters, flexible routines, high staffing ratios, and a strong philosophy focussed on the child result in a programme that provides children with opportunities for free access to the indoors and outdoors for most of the day.

DISCUSSION

This study has continued to promote lively discussion amongst the facilitators. We are pleased to find that a significant number of centres in our region encouraged free access to the outdoors for most of the day. What happens for children during that time is a question yet to be answered.

The findings raise a number of issues that have relevance to staff, parents and policy makers. It was interesting to see how much diversity there is in the way staff and management interpret the regulatory framework. Early childhood services are chartered under a framework that is committed to the pursuit of quality care and education for children. In our sampling of centres the interpretation of a quality programme appears insular in character. A concern here must be to question whether the intent of the aspiration for children, as defined in *Te Whaariki*, is being undermined. Where is the assurance that all children attending early childhood services experience the full intent of this aspiration? Is it time to spell out the expectation of how much of the day centres should provide for free access between indoors and outdoors?

It would appear that often limitations due to structural factors such as the environment and staffing restricted children's opportunities to have free access. It was interesting to note that structural factors were identified as making access both easy and difficult. This suggests that the factors themselves are neutral, it is what the adults do with them that make the difference. The impact of this deserves some consideration. It seems that structuring the daily schedule is one way centres try to overcome the limitations. It was worrying to note the high numbers of transitions for some children in those centres with limited or no free access to the outdoors. These children would also have limited time to engage in any depth way with the possibilities of the outdoors. What attitudes to the outdoors are being fostered in these children? How are these programmes empowering children? Who is the structured daily schedule benefiting - the children or the staff?

A further cause for concern is the limited access to the outdoors for infants and toddlers in age specific programmes. What attitude will these children develop towards the outdoors? Can the indoors provide a sufficient range of opportunities for physical development for this age group?

It appears that some teachers overlook the powerful positive outcomes of free access to the outdoors. These outcomes include:

- Provide optimal opportunities for learning.
- Develop a life-long positive attitude to recreation and sport.
- Enhance problem-solving.
- Enhance active exploration.
- Reduce instances of challenging behaviour.
- Support the instinct for play.
- Provide opportunities for extended engagement in play.
- Reduce stress for centre adults
- Be empowering for children under two because they have opportunities to develop physical competence, have long uninterrupted periods of exploration, and express their competence without adult-driven care routines.

As with much research the answer to one question raised a number of other questions to be answered. What we did find out is that there is an element of lottery in what children will experience of the outdoors in early childhood centres. The odds can be increased by choosing a mixed age centre for infants and toddlers and in choosing a centre with a well-designed environment and flexibility in daily routines. The final question still remains – is the golden kiwi childhood a lottery and what are the odds that the emerging generations will have a positive attitude to the outdoors?

REFERENCES

Chawla, L. (1990). Ecstatic places *Children's Environments Quarterly, 7*(4), 18– 23.

Day, C. (1995). *Architecture and environmental design as a healing art.* London: Harper Collins

Dovey, K (1990). Refuge and imagination: Places of peace in childhood. *Children's Environments Quarterly 7* (4), 13 - 17.

Greenman, J., & Stonehouse, A. (1997). *Primetimes. A handbook for excellence in infant and toddler programs.* Australia: Addison Wesley Longman.

Greenman, J. (1998). *Caring spaces, learning places: environments that work.* Redmond, WA. Exchange Press

Hillary Commission. (2001). *Getting set for an active nation. Report of the sport, fitness and leisure ministerial taskforce.* Wellingtor.. New Zealand.

Ministry of Education. (1998). *Quality in action. Te mahi whai hua.* Wellington: Learning Media Ltd.

New Zealand Government. (1998). *Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations.* Wellington: Government Print.

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. (2000). *Report to the House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee.* London: POST.

Olwig, K.R. (1991). Childhood, artistic creation and the educated sense of place. *Children's Environments Quarterly, 8*(2), 4 – 18

Rivkin, M. S. (1990). *The great outdoors: Restoring children's right to play outside.* Washington DC: National Association of the Education of Young Children

Stephenson A. (1999). *Opening the outdoors – A reappraisal of young children's outdoor experiences. Occasional Paper* Wellington: Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Unviersity of Victoria.

Stephenson A. (1999). Images of empowerment – the outdoor experiences of one-year-old children. *Early Childhood Folio 4,* 8 12.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colleen Lockie has been involved in early childhood for over 20 years as a teacher, lecturer and professional development facilitator. She is currently the Director of the Christchurch College of Education Professional Development Contract. Jocelyn Wright's background in early childhood spans almost 3 decades during which time she has held a number of roles. She is currently a professional development facilitator for the Christchurch College of Education contract. The authors became interested in this area of study as a result of many reflective discussions in the office concerning children's access to the outdoors in early childhood centres. They wondered what was typical for children in this respect, particularly when issues of health, obesity, environmental education and exploration of the natural world were considered.