

# Learning by the Yard

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### **Rationale for the Development of School Grounds as Natural Learning Environments**

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Schools and school grounds should be designed to be places where children can do their best growing and learning. Most adults would agree with this statement. Why, then, do most schoolyards look the way they do?

Look at your neighborhood or regional school. Chances are the yard is a bare, uncomfortable place where there is not much to do. There is little shelter or protection from wind and sun. There is little structure to interest or inform the children who use it. By eliminating most plant and animal life in favor of flat open “play” space, we have eliminated most of what interests and engages children outdoors. Instead of exploring and playing on their own, children require teachers to organize games and tell them what to do. Children forced to spend time on such yards are often bored and unhappy. Bullying and accidents are frequent occurrences. These results have high costs for the community.

Reporting for NBC News after the tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, Richard Rodriguez pointed out the impersonal, non-nurturing and un-welcoming nature of the outdoors at the school. His editorial opinion was that such an environment leads naturally to alienation and troubled children. At a minimum, such an environment teaches children that the outdoors holds little of interest; that the valuable lessons happen only inside the building. At its worst, the message to children is that the adults in their world do not care for them enough to provide for their comfort, interest, or safety.

As well as the unnecessary human cost, there are economic costs involved in maintaining these sterile, unproductive environments. They must be mowed, watered, fertilized and weeded. The prevalent monoculture of turf grass creates unnecessary run-off, contributes to heat build-up, provides hostile conditions for growing shrubs and trees, and presents a hard compacted surface that is unforgiving on knees and shins. Often such yards include poorly drained areas that turn to mud when it rains. Difficult to use, such schoolyards discourage outdoor play. They are a wasted resource of considerable value.

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If we consider school grounds habitat for children, places where they live and work each day, and places from which they are actively constructing their own knowledge of the world, we can understand the need for more thoughtful design. Every child is different, but all children need a range of shelter and stimulation. They need quiet and active spaces, and they need material to explore. All children need messages from the environment about what to do and where to go. This need can be met through carefully designed yards that include observable natural systems and that encourage investigation.

Research shows that healthy child development can be supported best by an ecologically valid place, one with sufficient diversity to support and accommodate a diverse group of learners (Moore, 1997). Most schoolyards for children are not ecologically viable or valid. The current practice of leveling, grading, planting to turf and paving with asphalt is by any measure a radical and costly alteration of the natural environment, which results in an ecological desert. Educators and parents are beginning now to recognize and address this situation.

Responding to children's need for structure and challenge, many communities are raising considerable sums to build play structures on their school grounds. These built structures provide for some of children's needs for large motor development and for social spaces. However, they can engender conflict by attracting more children than can be accommodated safely, especially when they offer the only interesting activity on a barren yard. Usually they are isolated in full sun with no shelter or imaginative links to other activities on the yard. In addition to this drawback, all but the very best are static and unresponsive, limiting children's imagination and encouraging only a small range of activity.

Designers, parents and school communities largely overlook the enormous wealth of interest, comfort and the educational opportunities provided by plants. Plants can provide shade, shelter, definition of spaces, places to hide, observable natural processes, diversity of forms, color, texture, and scent. Plants mark the seasons. Plants provide habitat for animals, birds and insects. Such wildlife increases geometrically the interest and scope of the yard. The more diversity a yard can support, the better the chances that every child will find things to do and explore.

As children observe what is going on around them, they begin to ask questions, form hypotheses, test their assumptions. Children read both the environment itself, and the feelings, reactions and actions of others within that place. They develop vocabulary to express what they see and feel. They find places to test their strength and see how fast they can run. They also learn to find solace in quiet sheltered places when they are feeling sad or need to talk to a friend. The schoolyard that provides for children's real needs begins to be a habitat for engaged and empathetic children who feel connected and held by their community and their world.

Moore, Robin C. and Wong, Herbert H., 1997. *Natural Learning, The Life History of an Environmental Schoolyard*. Berkeley: MIG Communications.