# Well-being and outdoor pedagogies in primary schooling: The nexus of well-being and safety.

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## Abstract

Society today is inundated by a multitude of messages regarding the risks and dangers that affect youngsters, with media constantly talking about 'cotton wool' kids (see Furedi, 1997, 2001, 2006) and an 'obesity epidemic' (see Wright and Harwood, 2009). A social panic has been created by the media, which ignores the positive outcomes of risk-taking, sensationalises risks, and focuses on the dangers of the world. In popular discourse contradictions are in evidence, on the one hand adults are concerned about the safety of young children; on the other hand many argue that society wraps children in 'cotton wool' such that they are denied opportunities to play outdoors for fear of accidents. Research has shown that negotiating risks and relating them to individual capacities is essential for the development of young children and their ability to learn from their mistakes and become aware of their personal health and safety (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006). This paper is based on a pilot study that explores young children and their significant others' perceptions and experiences of risk and safety, looking particularly at the ways in which experiences of outdoor learning may affect the well-being of children. Using an ethnographic approach the research examines how parents and teachers define well-being, and how being in the outdoors is seen to affect pupils' well-being. This paper, a work in progress, asks if and how outdoor activities, through outdoor learning, contribute to the physical and emotional well-being of young children, briefly touching on theories of power and control.

## Introduction

This paper draws upon preliminary findings of the Well-being and Outdoor Pedagogies project[1] which examines various notions of well-being and is concerned to develop the concept of outdoor pedagogies. The ethnographic fieldwork for this project was conducted in the spring of 2008 at a small charity-run residential outdoor centre in the English countryside. The fieldwork involved the centre staff, the visiting teachers from Oliver Primary School and their pupils, aged 8 and 9. Using participant observation during the residential stay at the centre, events were recorded as they were taking place, in order to acquire a deep understanding of the people in that social situation (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Each primary school teacher was observed while facilitating a session, taking into account the impact that his/her approach had on the children involved in the outdoor activity which included 'team building' activities and nature exploration. In-depth interviews were then carried out with the teachers, Ms Grey, Ms Kent and Mr Harris, the head teacher, as well as with six pupils and their mothers who volunteered to be interviewed. The one to one interviews with the teachers took place

at the outdoor centre during the school's visit and lasted about an hour. A strong rapport had already been built with the teachers from research undertaken at the centre the preceding year. The initial research for this well-being project explored children's and their significant others' perceptions and experiences of risk and safety. This paper considers understandings of risk and draws attention to the nexus of well-being and safety in outdoor learning. We examine here how the parents and teachers define well-being, and how being in the outdoors is seen by them to affect pupils' well-being. An interpretative approach was adopted in order to understand and make sense of the perceptions of the teachers and parents of the children (pupils) who went to the centre, in relation to pupils' well-being, and how they linked well-being to being in the outdoors. This paper is a work in progress.

Well-being is an ambiguous concept with numerous philosophical dimensions ranging from physical health to various forms of happiness. According to the classic definition long used by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1946), "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (cited in WHO, 1947, p. 16). Well-being now refers to what constitutes the 'healthy' physical, mental and social state of individuals. The concept of well-being has emerged as a significant indicator in health discourse of the now accepted broader reach of notions of health (Germov, 1999). UNICEF (2007) uses a measure of external 'reality' and subjective responses to identify 'dimensions of child well-

being' in 'rich countries.' The project claims to have undertaken, '[A] comprehensive assessment …of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations,' (p. 9) through examination of the following: Material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective interpretation of well-being from a number of 11, 13, 15 year-old children who were surveyed. The subjective interpretation of children's well-being was obtained through the selected children rating their perceptions on three components: a) health, b) school life and c) personal well-being. The indicators used were a) health – percentage of young people rating their own health no more than 'fair' or 'poor' b) school life – percentage of young people 'liking school a lot' and c) personal well-being – percentage of children rating themselves above the mid-point of a *'Life Satisfaction Scale'* and the percentage of children reporting negatively about personal well-being (see UNICEF, 2007).

The purpose here is not to discuss in any depth the UNICEF large scale survey, but more particularly to point to the complexity of the notion of well-being and the difficulties involved in attempting a universalised and totalising understanding of what constitutes well-being for comparative purposes such as this. Whilst a survey of this nature may give results that suggest children in the UK have the lowest measure for well-being amongst all the countries in the survey (UNICEF, 2007), there is a need for considerable caution in the reading of these conclusions. We are reminded of critiques raised to research which isolates empirical data from the social and political context within which they emerge and of the many critiques of the use of survey for understanding and making sense of subjective interpretations.

In our study, we situate and contextualise notions of well-being, exploring the 'multiple versions' and constructions of reality in relation to this complex notion. We take a social constructivist approach paying attention to participants' perspectives, tentatively within a post-structuralist framework, the latter informing our methodological approach. In this paper, we assume Foucault's rejection of totalising theories of explanation, seeing the 'exercise of power' as all pervasive and acknowledging the close relationship between power and knowledge. As Zink and Burrows (2006) highlight, taking a Foucauldian perspective provides a conceptual framework that enables us to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions around outdoor education, creating questions around these assumptions and providing opportunities to 'trouble' dominant Discourses.

Further, the concept of 'outdoor pedagogies' that we begin to develop is drawn initially in part from Bernstein's (1977) work on the classification and framing of knowledge, which claims that educational knowledge is a major regulator of the structure of experience and asks such questions as, "How are forms of experience, identity and relations evoked, maintained and changed by the formal transmission of knowledge and sensitivities?" (p. 5). His theoretical framework attempts to go beneath the surface of educational knowledge and the ubiquitous notions of ideologies, which are frequently used by analysts to attempt to explain structural conditions. He argues such reliance on ideological explanation alone prevents us from seeing what is happening and therefore limits us in making sense of the pedagogic process and the structures, which shape and control knowledge and identities. Evans and Davis (2002, p. 28), whose work draws upon and develops Bernstein's theoretical position to inform research and theory in physical education, ask "How are particular forms of knowledge and discourses translated into pedagogical practices, and with what consequences for identity and consciousness?" (p. 28). Similarly, following Bernstein and Evans and Davis, we are concerned to explore how particular forms of educational experiences and discourses are understood and made sense of in relation to outdoor experience, well-being and primary schooling in the context of the predominant 'cotton wool' culture (see Humberstone and Stan, in press).

## Methodological overview

The research process took a qualitative stance, by adopting an ethnographic approach in its broadest sense. Ethnography is considered to be sensitive and can provide for a deep holistic understanding of the social phenomena explored (Davies, 1984; Fetterman, 1989; Griffin, 1985; Humberstone, 1986; Willis, 1977). It is both rigorous and flexible, as it is considered to require disciplined, intense observation and high levels of engagement within the culture explored (Walford, 2002) and is underpinned by a credible theoretical underpinning (Delamont, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Malinowski, 1922), but it also requires for the researcher to act as a human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, in any ethnographic study the researcher becomes the research tool par excellence, capturing the intricacy, subtlety, and ever-changing situation of the human experience (Denzin, 1989; Fetterman, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were the main methods of data collection, however a fieldwork diary was also kept and relevant documents were collected.

Interview data, observational data and field notes were peer reviewed as the authors discussed and analysed the data. In this paper, interviews are the primary source of data, since they were considered

the most relevant for understanding the perceptions of the teachers and parents on risk, safety and how these adults define well-being. The interviews conducted were informal, but were based on a list of issues that the research intended to consider. The questions were open-ended and non-directive, and the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely, and the conversation was allowed to develop organically without too much researcher intervention.

The interviews with the teachers were conducted at convenient times during the school's visit at the outdoor centre. The three teachers were interviewed individually and their responses were recorded using a digital recorder. However, because of time constraints and in order to make the participants as comfortable as possible during the 'strange and artificial' situation that an interview can create (Walford, 2001, p. 89), the six mothers were interviewed together as a group at the school after their children had returned from their experience at the centre. The group interview with the mothers was video-recorded in order to make it easier to identify who was talking at any given time. All the participants in the research were ensured anonymity and confidentiality and were given the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Thus all the names used in this paper are pseudonyms, and not the real names of the participants or the institutions[2].

In order to place the research in context, the next two sections give details of the primary school and the outdoor centre. There then follows the analysis of the perceptions of parents and teachers on pupils' well-being.

## The primary school context

Oliver Primary School is a mixed, large, community junior primary school, with around 400 pupils, aged between 7-11 years. The pupils come from varied social backgrounds. Most of the pupils are of White British origin, however, the school enrols pupils from other ethnic backgrounds such as Asian British Indian, Asian British Pakistani, Black African, Black British Caribbean and Chinese. Moreover, there is a high turnover of pupils, due to the mobility of the community. All the information about the school has been taken from the Ofsted[3] inspection reports.

## The context of the outdoor residential centre

For issues of anonymity, the real name of the centre and school are not mentioned, however, a brief description of the centre is provided based on the information taken from the centre's website, brochures, interviews with the staff and observations made in the field. This should help the reader to have some understanding of the place. The centre is situated in a setting in the English countryside, not very far from a large city and Oliver Primary School, with which it has a long-standing relationship. It is owned and managed by an organisation of youth groups. The centre has over half a century of experience in providing and promoting social educational programmes for young people and adults. The centre has a self-financing policy, which makes it dependant on charitable donations and local fundraising initiatives undertaken by a team of volunteers. Funding also comes from primary and secondary school groups which occupy and utilise the house and its facilities during midweek periods and when member groups cannot normally attend.

Some of the youth organisations and schools attending the centre run their own personal development/educational programmes. The staff at the centre provide for youth groups, primary and secondary schools that have particular needs, and the centre try to work with teachers and group leaders in planning and delivering their programmes in order to ensure a productive and enjoyable event. The centre indicates in its documentation that it offers a flexible, comfortable approach and accessible surroundings in order to encourage the individuals to learn new skills, build confidence and share their time in an enjoyable way. The schools are frequently involved in choosing the activities and putting together the programme. Some of the activities are facilitated by the visiting teachers, rather than the centre staff, and schools are aware of this fact before going to the centre.

### Perceptions of the participants on well-being

An interpretative approach was adopted in order to understand and make sense of the perceptions of the teachers and parents on the experiences of the children who went to the centre, in relation to pupils' well-being, and how well-being was linked to being in the outdoors. What follows is a reflection on the perspectives of the parents and the teachers taking part in the study.

### Perceptions of the parents on the well-being of their children

The parents that were interviewed were all mothers, five of whom were of white heritage and one was Asian British Indian. Although we would

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have welcomed the perspectives of the fathers of the children interviewed, no fathers volunteered to take part in the research. It was decided to conduct a group interview with all the six mothers, rather than individual interviews, for reasons of time constraint, as we did not want to interfere too much with their busy schedule, as well providing them with a supportive environment. But also as there had been no opportunity to build any kind of rapport with the mothers prior to the interview, it was felt that by conducting a group interview, this could make the experience much more pleasant for the participants and it would enable the mothers to support and rely on each other, and build on each other's statements. The group interview was undertaken at Oliver School at the end of the school day and lasted for an hour. The researcher took a step back during the interview, allowing the discussion to flow on its own, and only intervening to ask a new question when it was felt it was appropriate.

The mothers were asked to say what children's well-being meant to them. They provided a number of responses, most of which seemed to revolve around the children's happiness, independence and character building, as can be seen in the extract below:

Ina: First of all what do you understand by their well-being? […] What do you think the well-being of a child is?
P4: If they're happy.
P3: If they're independent, bring themselves out of themselves.
P5: It's definitely character building.
P2: And it gives them a very good memory.
[…]
P5: I think it's the character building, the independence/
P6: Confidence/
P5: Yeah, building the confidence and being outdoors and all that fresh air and everything. (Interview with parents, 15.07.2008)

When asked if they thought that the residential visit at the outdoor centre contributed to the well-being of their children, the response was very positive from all the parents, one of the mothers adding that such a visit could help the children develop their own individuality away from their other siblings, as this extract shows:

Ina: So you think that this visit contributed to their well-being?
Ps: Yeah, yeah.
P3: I think it makes them feel special as well in their own individual way, I think, 'cause they've not got like brothers and sisters, you know, one's better than the other […]. (Interview with parents, 15.07.2008)

The parents believed that outdoor activities could contribute to their children's well-being, both physically and mentally, as they could not only provide the exercise and the fresh air that the children need, but it can also help them develop their communication skills. In our society, where technology is thought to be tending to replace human interaction, these parents were concerned that their children engage more with one another as is evident in the extract below:

P4: It's good for them.
P6: They're outside/
P4: Outside, vitamin D, you know, fresh air and obviously exercise, rather than just sitting indoors.
P2: I mean there is so much, I mean there's computers and tele, so many things that they can just latch onto now.
P3: Yeah, I dread to think what's going to be like when he's an adult because there's no communication with anybody/
P2: That's it, that's the big issue/
P3: That's the big issue/ (Interview with parents, 15.07.2008)

For the majority of the mothers, the well-being of their children was not simply connected to their child's present state of being a child, but they were concerned for the futures of their children. There is an indication that, for some of the mothers, current well-being of their children had implications for their children's well-being as they grow up into adulthood.

**Perceptions of the teachers on well-being**

There was already strong rapport built between the teachers and the researcher, due to their involvement in a previous research study conducted at the same outdoor centre the preceding year. One-to-one interviews were carried out during the school's visit at the centre with the two classroom teachers and Mr. Harris, the head teacher of Oliver Primary School.

Mr. Harris: Well, the well-being of children probably relates to the physical and mental […} state in a healthy way. Certainly the outdoor experience promotes both of these, and it's an added dimension to the curriculum […], absolutely vital
Ina: In what way?
Mr. Harris: I think not only in terms of teambuilding and that way, in which you promote social skills, but also because they do (it does) seem that exercise and ways in which the activities are promoted at these activity centres have their role in the physical and emotional well-being, […] but it's also working as a team […] and I think clearly

mental well-being is very important because the whole thing is stipulated to actually work in a way that minds work together, for the team building exercises, which is crucial, […] we find that really useful. (Interview with Mr. Harris, 14.05.2008)

In the above example Mr Harris saw well-being encompassing both physical and mental states. He, like the mothers, perceived outdoor activities as having potential to develop social skills of the children, as well as to help maintain the physical and emotional health of the children. Mr. Harris raised the benefits of outdoor activities and being in the outdoors for the well-being of children. He also emphasised the importance of being in the outdoors as an added value to the curriculum

For the two classroom teachers from Oliver Primary School, Ms Grey and Ms Kent, there was a greater emphasis on safety affecting well-being:

Ms Grey: Well I think […], the well-being includes obviously protecting them, them being healthy, them having opportunities both in school and outside of school. A lot of it though, […], boils down, I think, to the financial side and how much things cost outside of school. And if you're obviously wanting the children to […] be more healthy and sort of play more, have more […] personality and develop that way, then I think there is going to have to be a big push on how much money goes into it to support parents […] And they're going to get big and all around fitness, they're going to develop obviously, […], more broader experiences I suppose. But if the parents haven't usually got the money, then it's not going to happen. (Interview with Ms Grey, 15.05.2008)

Well, safety and enjoyment is […] the key thing […] So, yeah, lots of things outdoors, but being safe and being aware of what's around you as well. (Interview with Ms Kent, 13.05.2008)

Both Ms Grey and Ms Kent, teachers at Oliver Primary School, emphasised the importance of safety for the well-being of children, with Ms Grey asserting that being healthy and having opportunities both outside and inside the school depended on the financial status of their parents[4].

**Well-being and the outdoor experience**

The comments of the parents and teachers above exemplify the complexities associated with the concept of children's well-being, particularly when related to being in the outdoors. Although there was some agreement between the participants of this study, the parents and the teachers tend to perceive the notion of well-being and the benefits of the outdoor activities for the well-being of children in a variety of different ways. This is partially a consequence of their social and professional locations. Parents are less exposed to official discourses around well-being. However, we are concerned to understand these different perspectives. Table 1 highlights the research participants' various perceptions on the well-being of young children and outdoor experience. This matrix gives a simplified representation of the ways in which the parents, the head teacher and the classroom teachers perceived the well-being of pupils and outdoor experience. We have selected here only those aspects which speak to the well-being of pupils and to the specific outdoor experience in the case of the teachers and general outdoor experiences for parents.

Table 1 provides a simplified representation of links we saw between the children's experiences of the outdoors and the well-being of children that can be identified from the research participants' interviews. The parents' perceptions seem to encompass a wider range of aspects related to the well-being of their children, some of which are also mentioned by Mr. Harris, the head teacher, such as well-being relating to both the physical and mental states and the potential of outdoor activities to develop pupils' social skills. However, the two female teachers appear to differ on what well-being is, when compared to the head teacher and the parents. The implications of the classroom teachers' understanding of well-being are explored below, when we asked the following question: 'Are all outdoor experiences beneficial for the well-being of primary school children?' Both Ms Grey and Ms Kent identify safety as an aspect of well-being and for Ms Kent this is a significant feature of the outdoor experience. A necessary focus on safety can, in our opinion, lead to over-concern for pupils' safety and over-protection of pupils and potentially a loss of opportunities for pupils to develop particular social skills. In the next section, we will look briefly at how power and control are exercised in the pedagogic relationship in the outdoors and we suggest the

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*4. The ways in which schools make available outdoor experiences to pupils is significant in determining which children have opportunities to take part. In this school, all children attend an outdoor residential centre at least once in their school life and financial support is given to help those from poorer families. Although economic well-being is a significant aspect, this paper is not concerned to focus on the economic situation of pupils and families.*

Table 1. Participant perceptions of well-being and the outdoor experience

| Parents | Mr Harris Head Teacher | Ms Grey | Ms Kent | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| • happy<br>• independence<br>• character building<br>• physical and mental states<br>• present and future states | • physical and mental states | • safety<br>• being healthy<br>• economic well-being | • safety<br>• enjoyment | **WELL-BEING** |
| • building confidence<br>• being outdoors<br>• fresh air<br>• vitamin D<br>• exercise<br>• communication skills | • promotes both physical and mental states<br>• adds to curriculum<br>• social skills<br>• activities<br>• physical and emotional well-being | • inside and outside<br>• financial status | • being safe<br>• aware of what's around | **OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE** |

strength of the pedagogic relationship (cf. Bernstein 1977) depends upon the ways in which the teacher sees the well-being of pupils in relation to their perceived underlying concern over pupils' physical safety.

**'Safety', power, control and well-being within outdoor pedagogies**

According to Delamont (1984) teachers find themselves in positions of power over their pupils, controlling what the pupils say and do in the classroom. The initial findings of our research suggest that, on occasions, the teachers' control over their pupils can have an unintended impact on their outdoor experience. Pollard (1985) argues that teachers take control in order to maintain their authority and to manage stress, to which we would add, in order to maintain discipline and manage perceived risk in the outdoors. Bernstein (1977; 1996) examines the transmission of power in and through pedagogic processes in education. Whilst in his later work Bernstein (1996) examined how power and control are used in education from a theoretical perspective. In this paper, we give a snapshot at the interplay of power, control and safety, in the outdoor pedagogic process with the teacher, Ms Grey, highlighting the emerging concepts of 'well-being' and outdoor pedagogy empirically.

On occasion, teachers exercise control over their pupils in the outdoors in a way which could have negative influences on the children and their well-being (Stan, 2009). Moreover, the lack of dialogue allowed for others, by a teacher or sometimes a specific pupil, may dominate in the activity engagement.

This we suggest is characteristic for what we term as 'controlling' approaches, or what Bernstein (1977) maintained is a strongly-framed pedagogy, of some of the participants, which hinders learning and thus may disempower the majority of pupils. A teacher adopting 'controlling' approaches, who exhibits strong framing in their teaching tends to value order and discipline and giving specific instructions, which on occasions we suggest does not allow for the conditions of collaboration and co-operation to be created within the group outdoor educational process. This contradicts the social nature of the team building activities promoted by this particular outdoor centre. This is highlighted in a reading of the extract below when the children were taking part in the 'blind fold' activity, leading each other along a line through obstacles.

Ms Grey: Stooop! If you all giggle you are not going to hear when they shout 'Obstacle ahead.' Alright, Jake, you're in a hole.
(There is shouting).
Pb1: Au! Au! Ken stop. (They are underneath the net).
Pb2: Ooh God!
Ms Grey stops them and asks them to put their long sleeve tops on.
Ms Grey: You've all got your long sleeve tops off. Put them on. Tom, put your goggles on. Stop cheating!
Pg: Miss Grey, can we go?
Ms Grey: No! (as she is helping pupils to get out of the net.) (Field notes I, pp. 36-37, 12.05.2008)

This snapshot of the 'blindfold' activity highlights the contradictions and dilemmas around the perceived need for the teacher to maintain the safety of pupils and her adoption of a particular 'controlling' approach. The first sentence above evidences Ms Grey's imposition into the activity. Ms Grey sees what is happening and conveys this to the pupils despite the aim of the activity being for the pupils to develop their own communication and support between each other in negotiating physical obstacles whilst being unable to see. Although the pupils were laughing as they moved along the line, the observer noted that this laughter did not appear to interfere with the pupils' ability to communicate the information to each other. This reading of the extract presents an example of strong pedagogic framing in which the teacher allows little opportunity for the pupils to frame and take control of the activity (Bernstein, 1977).

This controlling approach is also characterised by a lack of teacher self-control and a tendency for the teacher to dominate during the activity, as is suggested through the observation above. This puts the teacher, in this case, adopting such an approach in an overpowering position, strongly framing the activity, which can lead to frustration and lack of enjoyment within the pupil group. Hence, negative learning may occur, for example, the pupils may fail to learn to communicate with each other, to help each other, they may not gain the confidence to lead, or may not understand the need for sometimes having to relinquish leadership and let others lead. Consequently, the desired learning outcomes of the outdoor activities may not be achieved. We suggest that an over concern for safety, for the pupils' physical well-being, may, on occasions, be to the detriment of their emotion well-being and so affect the pupils' learning.

## Concluding remarks

Simply involving pupils in outdoor activities and merely telling them what to do and what they should learn or should have learned, does not ensure that learning will necessarily occur effectively and appropriately, or that these activities will be beneficial for their well-being. Elbers, Maier, Hoekstra and Hoogsteder (1992) argued that teachers need to be able to negotiate and communicate appropriately and, be adaptable and flexible in order to facilitate learning and have successful working experiences. We would suggest that teachers have to be concerned and aware of the impact that their differing approaches may have on the well-being and learning experience of the children and how concern for physical safety (well-being) affects these approaches, being conscious not to rely solely on the stated objectives of the outdoor activities to ensure the desired learning 'outcomes.' As Dickson (2005, p. 236) points out, having a well-designed process does not result in the participants

achieving the 'appropriate outputs.' Being in the outdoors, we would suggest, does not automatically imply that the pupils will benefit from this experience. But rather, we need to take a critical view, in order to engage with notions of power and control and how they are used in very real and perceived situation of safety in the outdoors in order to allow for democratic and social understandings to emerge, rather than the power and authority of teachers, on occasions, being unnecessarily legitimated.

We have highlighted the ways in which dominant discourses around well-being and safety are read differently by diverse participants involved in policy, schooling and parenting. These differences are partially mediated through various teaching approaches. Further, we have drawn attention to the nexus of well-being and safety and pointed to the ways in which a strongly framed pedagogy, shaped by teacher notions to maintain a perceived physical well-being of pupils, may in a sense be counter-productive to the development of pupil social well-being. Well-being, an ambiguous concept, may be interpreted in contradictory and contentious ways which has implications for practice and policy-making. Well-being is also a 'tricky' concept and arguably finds itself somewhat implicated in the 'bio-politics' associated with 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1975). However, it is not the purpose of this paper to trouble itself with such considerations, rather to point to broader influences which permeate the outdoor field and which require continuous interrogation.

## Acknowledgements

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