

RE-CONCEPTUALISING RISKS TO VIEW CITIES AS SITES FOR CHILDREN'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

RE-CONCEPTUALIZACIÓN DE LOS RIESGOS PARA VER LAS CIUDADES COMO LUGARES DE APRENDIZAJE EXPERIMENTAL DE LOS NIÑOS

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Abstract

Our cities are sites for experiential learning, but children have been losing opportunities to independently develop cognitive, social, physical and spatial skills gained from exploring urban areas. They are also losing opportunities to develop broader urban confidence and proficiency from learning to master their environment. In many English speaking and European countries, children's freedom to use and explore their cities on their own is curtailed by the anxiety of carers and policy makers about potential hazards and consequences. Professionals in planning and design fields may unwittingly contribute to images of children as being incompetent to negotiate urban environments. Efforts to include children in urban spaces and places through policies and designs may be unduly influenced by risk management and insurance considerations. When planning and urban design related professionals fail to critique or resist conventional policy responses to risk management, they may unwittingly contribute to images of children as being incompetent to negotiate urban environments. This paper argues that we need to reconceptualise notions of risk, and view cities as sites for children's experiential learning.

Resumen

Nuestras ciudades son lugares para el aprendizaje experimental, pero los niños han perdido la oportunidad de desarrollar de forma independiente habilidades cognitivas, sociales, físicas y espaciales obtenidas de la exploración de áreas urbanas. También están perdiendo la oportunidad de desarrollar mayor confianza en la ciudad y la competencia de aprender a dominar el ambiente. En muchos países europeos y de habla Inglesa, la libertad de los niños para utilizar y explorar sus ciudades por su cuenta, se ve limitada por la ansiedad de los cuidadores y los encargados de formular políticas sobre los posibles peligros y consecuencias. Profesionales en el campo de la planificación y diseño pueden contribuir, sin saberlo, a crear imágenes de niños incompetentes para negociar con el entorno urbano. Los esfuerzos para incluir a los niños en los espacios urbanos y los lugares a través de políticas y diseños pueden ser indebidamente influenciada por la gestión del riesgo y las consideraciones de los seguros. Este documento sostiene que es necesario reconceptualizar las nociones de riesgo y ver las ciudades como lugares de aprendizaje experiencial de los niños.

Palabras clave: niños, aprendizaje, riesgo, ciudades.

Key words: children, learning, risk, cities.

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Introduction

In many Anglo-European nations there is a growing network of children's educators, planners, urban designers, and landscape architects who are advocating for children (<18 years) to have more freedom to use urban spaces on their own without accompaniment by adults. The need for advocacy has arisen because there has been a significant decline in children's independent mobility (CIM) in these nations.

School travel data indicates children in different parts of the world have limited independent mobility. In the United Kingdom children who walked or cycled to and from school decreased from 90% in the 1970s to less than 50% in the 1990s (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990: 45). Over the past decade, researchers discovered less than 50% of children from Italy, Sweden and New Zealand experience CIM (Björklid, 2005; Mackett, Brown & Paskins, 2005; Prezza et al., 2001; Tranter & Pawson, 2001).

In Australia the proportion of children engaged in independent school travel decreased from 48% in 1966 to less than 16% in 2005 for one area of Melbourne (Peddie & Somerville, 2005). Data collected in 2008 in the western suburbs of Melbourne provides a more positive result, with 32% of children travelling to or from school on their own (Rudner, 2011). School travel data provides valuable information for decision-makers specifically addressing transport issues, but it is the larger trend that this data represents that requires our attention. Children who are not permitted to travel to and from school on their own are less likely to be allowed to engage in other independent activities that build skill to negotiate environments and urban competence, such as visiting friends and relatives, playing outside, going to the shops and taking public transport.

A major factor in low levels of CIM has been attributed to parental anxiety about the potential adverse situations children might encounter if they go out on their own such as traffic, molestation, bullying and making bad friends. Concern about 'risks' associated with children encounter encountering adverse situations is real, however concern is exacerbated by contemporary social and cultural notions of childhood. Valentine (2004) asserts children are positioned as irresponsible, carefree, and vulnerable to loss of innocence. Fotel and Thomsen (2004) argue high levels of adult surveillance to protect children is now a prevalent characteristic of children's lives. Anxiety, conceptions of childhood, children and the need for surveillance are maintained, re-created and contested through social interactions in space.

Exploratory research found that anxiety, and the physical absence of children from public space converges with local council programs and policy systems to support a 'public knowing' of risk (Rudner, 2011). This public knowing of risk comprises a common understanding that children are vulnerable to a variety of dangers, and potentially dangerous to themselves and to others (Rudner, 2011). As a result, children are confined to institutionalised spaces, undertaking formal activities under adult surveillance and being constantly supervised in public spaces rather than use public space on their own.

Educators, planners, urban designers, and landscape architects may unwittingly contribute to this public knowing of risk. Many may feel they cannot challenge the current risk culture, because it has become normalised by the insurance and risk management structures within which they work. But professionals can use their expert knowledge and skill to be strong advocates for changing how we view children in their urban environments. Planning and design professionals can help challenge normative understandings of risk in relation to children, and help others to reconceptualise prevailing notions of risk in conjunction with promoting cities as sites for children's experiential learning.

Conceptions of risk_

Risk and risk management are the products of scientific and social processes that designate potential hazards, victims and outcomes, and the ways in which potential hazards should be avoided, controlled, or mitigated. If we look more closely and try to understand what 'risk' is, we find the concept is rather ambiguous. It is used in everyday language to denote a hazard, event, chance, probability, possibility, impact, victim and questionable decision-making. Unfortunately, academic and professional literature provides adequate definitions of risk to improve our understanding. Therefore a new re-conceptualisation of risk is required.

One of the best definitions of risk currently available is offered by Jaeger, Renn, Rosa, and Webler (2001) who state: "Risk a situation or event in which something of human value (including humans themselves) has been put at stake and where the outcome is uncertain" (2001, emphasis in original). Jaeger et al.'s (2001) definition implies there is an intention to make a decision or undertake an action without a guarantee that desired results will eventuate. Instead of providing a purely objective explanation, Jaeger et al. (2001) insert human agency into the risk concept.

Their definition explicitly addresses the issue of value, as well as implied notions of intent and tradeoffs. Often these elements of risk are ignored, inferred or assumed; yet differing intents and values influence whether something is at stake, how much is at stake, and influences how potential consequences are assessed.

Jaeger et al.'s (2001) definition is valuable for providing insight into decision-making and CIM. When considering CIM, carers and professionals are essentially making decisions about putting children in uncertain situations, where the outcomes cannot be guaranteed, and the stakes are high. For example, carers are making trade-offs between matters such as children's independence and potential parental pain and regret if their children experience harm, while professionals are making tradeoffs between children's engagement in the environments they plan and/or design and the potential pain of legal liability and harm to reputation if a child experiences harm.

Unfortunately, Jaeger et al.'s (2001) definition only provides a starting point for understanding how risk may be conceived and acted upon; it does not help educators, planners, urban designers and landscape architects articulate risk in a way that helps them advocate for CIM. Risk needs to be reconceptualised as a relationship between the intent of an agent (individual, group, or organisation), what the environment offers, and the capabilities of an agent to use the environment in the intended manner. Trade-offs between possible costs and benefits in order to potentially achieve desired outcomes are part of ongoing decision-making processes, or stream of action, in the agent-environment relationship. Viewing risk as a relationship recognises that positive and negative outcomes are possible.

Reconceiving risk as a dynamic relationship allows for a multitude of tiny decisions to occur in a stream of action and events. It embodies risk within the knowledge and skills of decision-makers and the situations in which they are engaged. This conception of risk is more appropriate when considering CIM because it allows children and adults to incorporate children's growing competencies to negotiate their environments into decision-making processes over time, and adults' ability and comfortable to allow children the freedom to explore. For example, there is a greater probability for children to be harmed when crossing roads if they have very little experience and exposure to traffic compared to children who have crossed many different types of roads with different levels of traffic many times. The boys in Figure 1 and 2 are developing skills when they go to the park, get groceries from the shops, and cycle around their neighbourhood.

Image 1_Boys checking for traffic street in Melbourne, Australia.



Image 2_Boys crossing road after determining it is safe.





Image 3_Small regulation playground in Melbourne, Australia.

Cities as sites for experiential learning_

Essentially, professionals need to understand that current conceptions of risk and how risk needs to be reconceptualised are fundamentally tied to notions of 'knowing' and 'knowing about'. According to William James' radical empiricism there is a significant difference between knowing and knowing about (James, 1895/1977). Knowing is gained through primary or direct embodied experience from active exploration of environments, engagement with the world and development skills. Knowing about comprises secondary or indirect experiences that can extend primary knowledge or provide information that supports exploration, but it is mediated knowledge through the perspectives and experience of others.

There is an elevation of indirect/mediated knowledge over direct/ experiential knowledge in the way we view risk in relation to children (Rudner, 2011). Specifically, expert interpretations of scientific data have emphasised the notion that children are vulnerable, incompetent, and should be under adult surveillance within institutional settings and in public spaces. My review of 237 environment, transport, planning, urban design, health, community development and community safety policy documents from the international to the local level found policies overwhelmingly indicated that children do not have the skills to do such things as cross roads on their own or deal with bullying (Rudner, 2011). Importantly, policy documents tended to apply inadequate notions of risk that emphasised a negative causal relationship. In this conception of risk, a potential hazard or situation is viewed as adversely impacting upon a vulnerable child, leading to long-term serious emotional, psychological or physical damage.

Risk management is based on these ill-conceived and unproductive conceptions of risk. Comprising a suite of research, policies, procedures, programs and training, risk management promoted individuals to learn from other's experiences or hypothesised situations, rather than from their own experience. Children's development, their use of public space, and their ability to negotiate potential hazards are undermined by promoting possible negative consequences and a risk-averse culture. In this type of culture, children's development of environmental knowledge and skills are separated from the role of exposure and experience with world around them; they are mediated through formal education, stories, gossip, and expert advice. Carers' and professionals' skills to assess children's competence in their urban environment are also undermined. Adults in both caring and professional roles, are expected to refine their skills in locating and implementing expert advice about generalised children's needs and development, rather than relying on direct observation and experience of children's individual capabilities in their environments. As a result, mediated knowledge about children in their environments is elevated above experiential knowledge.

This distinction between knowing and knowing about is as integral to discussions about viewing cities as sites for learning as it is for re-conceptualising risk. In institutional settings such as school, children learn about their cities through subjects such as civics and citizenship, design, mapping, humanities, politics as part of their curriculum (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011). Even with children's active engagement in these subject areas, learning is primarily embedded within structures of 'knowing about'. While there has been increasing emphasis on learning outside the classroom in the United Kingdom through outdoor activities, field trips in the city and hands-on construction of gardens and other building projects (Malone, 2009), these approaches are only starting to re-emerge in Australia. Learning outside of the classroom is beneficial for children's development, however it still occurs within adult controlled environments where potential hazards and their management is mediated by adults.



Image 4_A larger regulation playground along central coast, Australia.

Indirect learning of cities and their people is supported in home and other environments. Children ‘know about’ their cities through their carers, other adults, the media, and gossip. Research by Malone (1999) and observations by Sutton (1997) indicate the image of the city that children appear to be learning is one of fear or concern about safety. This image could be translated into children’s fear of their urban environments now and in the future (Malone, 1999; Sutton, 1997). When CIM is restricted due to anxiety and fear, neither carers or their children engage in actual experiences that may contradict or challenge their conceptions, such as children’s competence and ability to play outside, go to the shops or take public transport within major incident.

Numerous researchers have found that children who experience CIM have more detailed, nuanced, and sophisticated knowledge of their urban neighbourhoods and the people within them (Freeman & Quigg, 2009; Lynch, 1977; Malone, 1999). Chawla and Heft (2002) extend this notion further by suggesting children’s knowledge of their environments, or urban competence, is integral for adaptability and adept negotiation of environments. The sense of confidence and control associated with knowledge and skill, and the role of competence in achieving personal satisfaction of emotional and psychological needs, can encourage a desire to engage in sustainable actions. This sense of competence cannot be gained solely through indirect knowledge.

Educators, planners, urban designers, and landscape architects are in a unique position to re-conceptualise cities as experiential sites for learning. We cannot negate the deep concerns of carers’ and other adults in children’s lives and the need for adults to help guide children in learning urban skills. The possibility that adverse situations might occur if children go out on their own cannot be ignored. However, we have a role to play in opening opportunities for discussion and exploration of the issues for better decision-making, and for promoting the benefits that cities can offer for children’s development.

These benefits can include many of the same benefits promoted by research and policy about higher density and mixed-used urban form such as increased social interaction, local destinations for shopping and play, advantages of public transport for travelling longer distances (Appleyard, 1981; Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2003, 2005; Hillman et al., 1990; Jacobs, 1961). In addition, cities offer opportunities for children to get lost, to feel wary or scared, to seek help from strangers if required. While carers’ anxiety means they may try to avoid uncomfortable feelings and experiences for themselves and their children, these experiences are integral in children’s development. The majority of children will become adults who will require a repertoire of experiences to successfully negotiate their lives and where they live.

Issues of risk for professionals in planning and design fields_

Tensions arise for educators, planner, urban designers and landscape architects when they are planning and designing programs, activities, and urban spaces for a multiplicity of users, including children. Professionals must work within the constraints of legislative, policy and risk management systems while simultaneously ensuring their vision for better spaces and places meet the needs of the people for whom they plan and design. In current structures, children are largely invisible, and so are their needs. To highlight the tensions as they related to children, I will discuss an example involving playground design and an example related to traffic management, and then suggest ways professionals in planning and urban design professions can help address the issues.



Playgrounds are spaces designed specifically for children. The safety of playground design can be easily controlled through policy and regulation. In Australia, risk management now appears to have a greater influence on design and materials than children's development needs. Risk managers have become de-facto planners, designers and builders through the standards required for playground equipment. The purpose of playground standards is to mitigate the number of accidents by making playground equipment safe. Imaginative spaces, equipments and materials using the design professions do not occur. This has resulted in standardised features and materials as can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3, and reporting requirements for insurance companies. For example, the Municipality Association of Victoria (2006) "Results from the 2005 audit show an improvement in risk management compliance scores, up to 68% from 63% in 2004. One of the key reasons for this was the improvement in the management of playground assets through regular and well documented inspections".

However, this also makes playgrounds boring, which has the potential to lead to increased severity of accidents as children seek greater challenge (Gill, 2007). In contrast, Figure 5 and Figure 6 shows playground design and development in many of the Scandinavian countries and Japan include features that are no longer common and often not permitted in many English speaking countries. Features deemed dangerous include greater heights, natural materials such as logs or water, and hard ground rather than soft rubber-based materials. According to Gill (2007), prevailing risk management practices promote an inappropriate application of workplace safety style regulations to children's development, and play spaces.

In contrast, traffic environments are less easy to control and manage to ensure children's safety. Rather than change the traffic environment as occurs with playground equipment, children's mobility and use of public space is controlled and managed. The primary rationale for traffic and road safety improvements are to increase motorised transport efficiency. The focus on efficiency means crash and other statistics are used to ascertain the safety of vehicle occupants, pedestrians, and the traffic environment, and to develop safety strategies. In a transport context, children are deemed to be at-risk, and they are identified as the cause of traffic accidents. Adult surveillance is promoted as the best method for protecting children from harm. Transport bodies can avoid changing the system through their definition of risk and the scope of their risk management policy. As Adams (2006 - italics in original) comments "the central message for both parents and children is the normality of traffic [danger] and the importance of deferring to it".

However, a review of empirical research indicated children's competencies might not be substantially different to those of adults (Cairney, Klein, Lee & Lovett, 2000). Cairney et al. (2000) suggest that children can be more patient while waiting to cross roads safely, and that children's skills to cross roads can be trained by exposure and experience. Acknowledgement of children's ability and need to learn about traffic for independent mobility and to access public has only recently been recognised in health policies (VicHealth, 2008). Unfortunately, transport bodies and the police continue to issue warnings about the dangers faced by children if they cross roads on their own.

The comparison between playgrounds and traffic highlights a deeper social and cultural issue of risk. Playgrounds are viewed as appropriate spaces for children, but not the broader urban environment. Through the social construction of childhood, children are defined as a sub-category of 'community' rather than part of the community. The designated category 'children' facilitates a more child-centred approach to planning and urban design in terms of listening to children's voices and considering their needs within the urban environment in matters pertaining to play spaces and safe routes to school. Paradoxically, the same category also facilitates greater surveillance and control over children to ensure they, their carers and professionals comply with specific behaviours that support, and are supported by, existing institutions, regulations and systems.

Image 5_A multi-storey playground constructed of wood and other materials in Chiba, Japan.

Educators, planners, urban designers, and landscape architects can help facilitate and negotiate social, cultural and regulatory structures to change current conceptions of risk and promoting cities as sites for learning. They can do this by shifting the focus from the problem of risk to children in public space toward the creation of learning opportunities and children's skills development in public space. Notions of skills, challenges, and learning provide a more positive avenue for discussing children's relationships with their environments. By emphasizing children's need to develop urban competence through accessing and using public space on their own, professionals can challenge current regulatory structures, including those related to risk management.

Planning and urban design related professionals can advocate for greater acceptance of children's use of public space, and the inclusion of children's voices in decision-making about the places they live. This can be achieved by incorporating research about children's development, features of child friendly environment into their practice, and disseminating information about and case study design examples to political leaders, professional groups, and community groups.

Importantly, resources should help professionals, the general public and carers engage with the issue by developing strategies to increase their confidence and ability to support children's use of public spaces, and confidence in children's competence to use public spaces successfully.

However, changing our views about risk and cities as sites for children's experiential learning is not enough. Part the risk relationship involves the environment itself, and what it offers. When conducting work, professionals can critically analyse whether they are incorporating children's developmental needs into decision-making processes. Furthermore, it means challenging conventional risk management and insurance structures by conducting balanced 'cost-benefit' analyses that assess the opportunities for children to increase cognitive, social, physical skills, and spatial skills, as well as the potential to experience harm. If the possibility of legal action means that the worst-case scenario is determining the quality of children's environments and their ability to access them, then we are doing something wrong. □□□



Image 6 Challenging playground open to imaginative play made of natural materials in Amsterdam, Holland.

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