Nature tables and pocket museums. From the Leicestershire classroom to the Mountain View Center for environmental education

# Tavoli della natura e musei tascabili. Dalla classe del Leicestershire al Mountain View Center per l'educazione ambientale

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This paper is part of a wider research initiative which is tracing the travel of ideas, practices and people from Leicestershire infant and primary schools to and from the USA during the 1960s and 70s. It takes as a starting point a drawing of a 1969 Leicestershire primary classroom detailing precisely the site of furniture, material objects, display boards, water sources, 'growing things', live animals, book racks and floorspace. The drawing, executed as a birds-eye view, has been reconstructed from memory by the teacher who had inhabited that space and with reference to a 1972 publication detailing an approach to environmental education that found its way to influence teacher development in the United States. This publication, written by the same teacher and her husband, was entitled Yesterday I Found and was funded by the Ford Foundation and published by the Mountain View Center for Environmental Education, Boulder Colorado. Two contemporary essays outlining theoretical propositions with regard to pedagogical relationships between people, place and things are considered alongside this publication in order to illuminate multi-disciplinary interpretations of classroom dynamics in the 1960s English primary school. The paper argues that the impact of this period of experimentation and exchange reached far beyond those decades of intense activity and travel and that the material conditions of the classroom as recalled from a teacher's point of view can aid to demonstrate that continuity.

Keywords: environmental education, nature tables, pocket museums, pedagogical spaces, Leicestershire

Questo contributo è parte di un più ampio lavoro di ricerca che traccia il viaggio di idee, pratiche e persone provenienti dalle scuole primarie e infantili del Leicestershire, da e per gli Stati Uniti, nel corso degli anni sessanta e settanta. Prende in considerazione, come punto di partenza, un disegno realizzato in una classe primaria del Leicestershire nel 1969, che dettaglia in modo

preciso la disposizione di mobili, oggetti materiali, spazi per l'esposizione, banchi, fonti d'acqua, aree per la germinazione delle piantine, animali vivi, scaffali di libri e pavimenti. Il disegno eseguito con vista dall'alto, è stato ricostruito a memoria dall'insegnante che aveva lavorato in quello spazio, e in riferimento a una pubblicazione del 1972 che spiegava analiticamente un approccio all'educazione ambientale che influì poi sulla didattica negli Stati Uniti. Questa pubblicazione, scritta dalla stessa insegnante e da suo marito, era intitolata Yesterday I Found ed è stata finanziata dalla Fondazione Ford e pubblicata dal Mountain View Center for Environmental Education, Boulder, Colorado. Due saggi contemporanei, che delineano le proposizioni teoriche riguardo alle relazioni pedagogiche tra persone, luoghi e cose, sono inoltre qui presi in esame accanto a questa pubblicazione al fine di illuminare le interpretazioni multidisciplinari delle dinamiche della classe nella scuola elementare inglese degli anni sessanta. L'articolo sostiene che l'impatto di questo periodo di sperimentazione e scambio si estese ben oltre quei decenni di intensa attività e viaggi, e che le condizioni materiali della classe così come richiamate dal punto di vista dell'insegnante possono aiutare a dimostrare questa continuità.

Parole chiave: educazione ambientale, tavole naturali, musei portatili, spazi pedagogici, Leicestershire

#### Introduction

American historian of education William Wraga (2014) has identified a strain of condescension toward progressive education in history of education scholarship in the USA, which has often resulted in what he calls misrepresentations of the historical record. The research presented here suggests that detailed documentation of personal histories of teachers, caught up in sustained progressive networks rooted in a particular understanding of the importance of the natural and local environment in encouraging rich learning among young people and their teachers, is necessary to counter that condescension. The English infant and primary schools of the immediate post-war decades can be compared with the schools of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy or Finland today with regard to the scale and frequency of international interest and visits. In what Roland Barth has termed the 'testimonial period' of the early 1960s, commentators vividly described changes in the education of young children which were, it was believed, almost impossible to capture and communicate on paper: you needed to be there and see with your own eyes (Barth, 1975, p. 464).

Advances in mathematics education, particularly the use of material methods, formed the first point of contact. A critical factor in this experience was to be able to acknowledge the significance of changes made in the material conditions and arrangements of people, place and things. As relatively few people could actually make the trip, photographic images and documentary film came to play a very important role in communi-

cating, to the American teaching profession and general public, the features and characteristics of English infant and primary education. But also, as this study demonstrates, lengthy periods of substantial travel by American educationalists and parallel commitments of English teachers and advisors to provide workshops and related developmental activities for teachers in the USA, were vital elements in the transfer of knowledge in these years. It is notable that the material features of the layout and purposeful design of school spaces were observed, recorded and remarked upon by those many visitors eager to capture and communicate the excitement of changes taking place in the everyday relationship between pupils, teachers and things in some English schools. A vast literature soon came to be published in the USA describing the changes evident to the observer<sup>1</sup>. However at the end of the 1960s two lesser known publications drew attention, independently of each other, to this seemingly powerful pedagogical triad - pupils, teachers and things - capturing through different disciplinary lenses, a similar theoretical perspective. These were the architect Peter Prangnell's essay, The Friendly Object (1969) and the science educator David Hawkins' I-Thou-It (1974)<sup>2</sup>. So it is to this period, the late 1960s to the early 1970s that this study turns to illuminate examples of practical expressions of the pedagogical power of natural and manufactured material in the experience of education.

We know that certain schools for young children, on both sides of the Atlantic, attracted national and international interest during the 1940s and in the immediate post war years.

For example, Impington village College Cambridgeshire; Crow Island elementary school, Winnetka, USA; Eveline Lowe junior school, London. However, the 1960s and early 1970s saw a steady stream of visitors to English infant and primary schools from Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, the USA. Diane Ravitch has remarked "The near-evangelistic appeal of 'open education' created a boom in transatlantic travel; by 1969 study teams from 20 different American cities made the pilgrimage to England to learn first hand about informal education" (2001, p. 57). These generated further visits of

<sup>1</sup> Diane Ravitch provides an overview of this literature in her 2001 publication 'Reformers, Radicals and Romantics' in The Jossey-Bass Reader on School Reform.

<sup>2</sup> See also 'I-Thou-it' (Hawkins, 1971) in Rathbone, C. (Ed.) 'Open Education. The Informal Classroom.'

teachers, advisers, journalists, film makers and administrators. Certain regions of England, led by progressive directors of education, were drawn to the attention of the visitors by the central government Ministry of Education. Infant and primary schools in Oxfordshire, the West Riding of Yorkshire and Leicestershire were particularly sought out. The latter authority, Leicestershire, seems to have been most active in forming lasting relationships and exchanges between British and American educationalists. An important aspect of this phenomenon, that this paper seeks to illuminate, was the creation of personal networks of individual teachers and advisers who, as Lydia A. H. Smith (1988) has observed, knew and visited each other.

## 1. Dorothy and John Paull

Two Leicestershire teachers, Dorothy and John Paull, made extensive travels during these years, demonstrating to American teacher observers how education for the young child might be designed to stimulate and support latent curiosity. In Yesterday I Found, Dorothy's classroom was used to illustrate and record in detail the material arrangements of things and creatures living and otherwise. This was done in a conscious effort to counter the false assumption, developing at that time in America, that informal methods meant that the teacher's role was minimal in supporting children's learning. John Paull, originally from Cornwall, trained at the City of Leicester Teacher Training College, became a primary school teacher and later primary adviser for science education in all of Leicestershire's 325 schools. Paull was a natural scientist and keen collector of stones, fossils and shells. His approach to teaching encouraged the collection and curation of tiny natural objects for display in what he called 'pocket museums'<sup>3</sup>. Dorothy Robinson, originally from Yorkshire, came into teaching as an unqualified supply infant and nursery school assistant, encouraged by Sir Alec Clegg, at the time Chief Education Officer for the West Riding of Yorkshire. She also trained at Leicester where she met and later married John Paull. During the mid 1960s Paull estab-

3 These were small or pocket-sized metal containers that had previously contained stock cubes, tobacco, sweets or such.

lished the first Science Education Field Study Centre for primary schools in a former one teacher school in the village of Foxton, Leicestershire and his methods of engaging teachers with the natural environment local to them was brought to the attention of American visitors to the Authority by Leicestershire primary adviser, Bill Browse. Recalling these years, Paull remarked,

[...] my classroom became a visiting spot for teachers from America. They came to see progressive schools at work and came to my classroom to observe how I integrated science, mathematics, reading and writing (Paull, 2018).

One of these visitors was the physicist and philosopher David Hawkins, professor of the philosophy of science at Boulder University, who had previously worked on the Manhattan project as Robert Oppenheimer's administrative assistant<sup>4</sup>. Hawkins spent the year of 1964 in England visiting classrooms to see for himself what he had heard to be so remarkable. He returned in 1967 accompanied by his wife Frances, an elementary school teacher, who spent time working in a nursery school in the North East of England. Following this, at Hawkins' invitation, John and Dorothy Paull spent three weeks in the summer of 1968 in Vermont running workshops for teachers in schools on Title III funding established by Lyndon Johnson to address areas of poverty<sup>5</sup>. The following year they gave up their summer vacation to the professional development of American teachers first at Montpelier in Vermont for a further three weeks followed by two weeks at the Education Development Centre in Boston<sup>6</sup>. On both occasions, David and Frances Hawkins participated and it was at this time that the idea of setting up a Centre for Environmental Education was hatched. Diane Ravitch (2001) explains Hawkins' enthusiasm for progressive education as partly a result of his wife

- 4 For a resume of Hawkins' educational work, see Helen and Joseph Featherstone's 'The Word I Would Use is Aesthetic: Reading David Hawkins' (2002).
- 5 The Vermont project was managed by Marion Stroud, a former Infant teacher from England who had married an American and settled there.
- 6 The EDC was a nation-wide programme of teacher and curriculum development. Its importance at this time can not be underestimated as a centre for experimentation and innovation. One project within the EDC was the Elementary Science Study (ESS) of which Hawkins was director.

Frances's teaching career in 1930s California. However, this does not account for the role of friendship and personal networks founded and sustained through travel and exchanges during these years between individual teachers, advisers and the Hawkins.

A life-long friendship was established between the Hawkins and the Paulls. The Paulls had helped Anthony (Tony) Kallet and David and Frances Hawkins establish the Mountain View Center for Environmental Education (MVC) at Boulder, Colorado<sup>7</sup>. Inspired by what he had seen as best practice in English schools, David Hawkins had secured the funding and invited the Paulls to spend a year helping to establish the philosophy and identity of the Center<sup>8</sup>. One of the requirements of the funders was that educational development be carried out with a minority group<sup>9</sup>. The Center was designed to provide an advisory service for teachers throughout the USA aimed at helping them develop children's thinking and imaginative exploration and to enrich their classrooms in various ways using the natural environment (Featherstone and Featherstone, 2002, p. 24). To promote their work among teachers in the USA, a periodical called Outlook was published three times a year (1971-1986) edited by Kallet. Through this periodical, those American teachers unable to travel and see for themselves the relationship between pupils, teachers and things in an english primary school classroom were introduced to the richness of the material arrangements thought to be essential to support and sustain the informal method. The details of how Dorothy had arranged her classroom over two years, working with the same group of mixed age pupils, was described by John Paull in *Yesterday* I Found:

The painted brick walls of Dorothy's classroom were covered with constantly changing displays of paintings, block-prints, tie-and-dye, collage, embroidery and samples of the children's writing. The shelves around the room were used to display rocks, shells and other collections. Magazines, maps, mobiles and unfinished pieces of children's work hung down from lengths of rope which

- 7 The MVC was funded for the first five years by the Ford Foundation.
- 8 New Zealander Elwyn Richardson was also among the founders.
- 9 The founders travelled long distances in order to provide workshops for the minority Sioux of Pine Ridge, S. Dakota.

were strung from wall to wall, about six feet above the floor, looking for all the world like clothes lines. At any time a child could reach up and take a magazine or map from the clothes pin that held it. [...] In addition to the many animal cages around the room, there was a large terrarium and insect house, [...] containers sprouting grass seed, cress and a variety of plants, an ironing board and a large metal tub for dying fabrics. Magnifying glasses and miscellaneous science equipment occupied shelves around the room (Paull and Paull, 1972, pp. 18-19).

Dorothy recalls how the publication had been developed. In October 1969, Kallet, equipped with two cameras set out to record how a Leicestershire primary school teacher typically interacted with the class. She recollected,

He used two Single Lens Reflex cameras hung around his neck taking one picture every 30 seconds, following me with the two Primary advisors observing and making notes. Later we made a taped commentary to accompany the slides for talks to teachers at Heads' meeting<sup>10</sup>.

Kallet, who had taught at the independent progressive Shady Hill School in Cambridge Massachusetts, first visited Leicestershire in 1963 and was so impressed by what he saw that he accepted the invitation to work under the leadership of Chief Education Officer Stewart Mason for the following seven years as part of the Leicestershire education advisory service. An energetic and enthusiastic promoter of what became known in America as 'open learning', he devoted his energies, after returning to the USA, to teacher development very much in the style of informal learning established by the more progressive English regions<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by author with Dorothy Archer, June 2018. There were a total of 69 slides.

<sup>11</sup> The term 'open learning' was not generally used in England. Rather, 'informal methods' and 'the integrated day'.

## 2. 'I-Thou-It'

After leaving the Manhattan project, David Hawkins devoted the remainder of his career to the educational development of teachers, particularly of teachers who worked with very young children. During the 1960s and 70s Hawkins produced a series of influential essays and one that touches on matters of space, materiality and design in education was 'I-Thou-It'. Published in 1974 as one of a number of essays in a volume by Hawkins entitled The Informed Vision, this piece was based on a talk that he had given on April 3rd, 1967 at the Primary Teachers' Residential Course, Loughborough, Leicestershire.

In 'I-Thou-It' Hawkins outlines the role played by objects/subjects of mutual interest and learning from the point of view of the pupil and the teacher in a balanced pivotal relationship. He sought to revise the well recognised key relationship between teacher and taught to invite attention to be paid to the third element in the triangle: objects, things, and ideas. Hawkins drew from past and present in promoting these ideas including the past experience of his wife Frances who had taught in progressive settings in 1930s California. A key element generating the power of the subject/object was its aesthetic quality which he believed functioned to connect curiosity and engagement with interest and motivation. Kallet, reflected in his own writing on the essential triad of pupil, teacher and thing in his chapter 'Some thoughts on children and materials' (1971) which can be read as a companion piece to Hawkins' 'I-Thou-It'.

# 3. Stones as aesthetic agents in learning

Both Hawkins and Kallet drew inspiration for their writing and practice from their observations of Leicestershire teachers. Dorothy and John Paull were keen collectors of stones, bones, shells and fossils. John Paull devotes a large part of his autobiography, *Through my eyes: on becoming a teacher* (2012), to exposing the fascination of small stones for children and to his encouragement of the same fascination in teachers and other adults. *Yesterday I Found* describes how children in Dorothy's class became attracted by the essential beauty inherent in stones, particularly after Hawkins purchased a stone polisher for their use. But this was an attraction that could be experienced by anyone of any age as was indicated

in Kallet's recording of Stewart Mason's experience with stones on the occasion of the opening of the MVC:

'I was lucky enough to accompany a party which went to Caribou, and there almost on the roof of the world we set out in a massive gang to collect rock specimens. I followed in the wake with bent head not knowing what I was looking for, but picking up one stone after another only to discard. What a helluva lot of stone, billions and billions of them. Each one was different and beautiful... as each minute went by I became slightly more aware of scents, colors, sounds, things moving... But there was so much else. The whole riotous field of benevolent color was pulsating with life. Bees of many varieties, cicadas galore – hey, here's one sitting on my sleeve. And down below a small herd of Herefords with two little ones was slowly munching its way up the valley. And in the middle distance those three receding mountain ridges were ever getting bluer in the midday sun. What a memorable morning!" (Mason, 1970, p. 3)<sup>12</sup>

### 4. Bones, Shells and Pocket Museums

Yesterday I Found describes how with the engagement of the teacher in collecting, curating and creating an environment whereby learning occurred through genuine interest and research, the tiniest of objects could become launchpads for sustained interest. There is a section of the book describing one child's sustained research about bones, and the display of bones can be seen in Dorothy's plan as well as in photographic documentation in the publication. A display of shells can also be located in Dorothy's plan of her classroom and in Yesterday I Found the Paulls devote a chapter to work in the classroom with shells (1972, pp. 15-19). Later, shells were one theme taken up by the Paulls in the 1980s when they wrote a series of Ladybird books<sup>13</sup>. Nature Takes Shape was published in 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Transcription of a speech by Stewart Mason, given during the summer conference of the Mountain View Center.

<sup>13</sup> The Ladybird Book publishing company based in Loughborough produced a series of non-fiction information books, popular with children and teachers during the 1960s-80s.

# 5. 'The Friendly Object' and 'I-Thou-It'

Peter Prangnell, an English architect trained at the Architectural Association in London, was one among a loose network of radically minded European and American designers who became influenced by the revolutionary climate of the late 1960s which manifested itself in student action as well as a range of critical literature. 'The Friendly Object' was the title of an essay produced by Prangnell for a 1969 collection of radical reflections on the possibilities offered by thinking critically about the relationship between architecture and education. The collection was published as a Special Issue of the Harvard Educational Review. It is unlikely that Prangnell had any connections with the Hawkins, Kallet or the Paulls yet his essay, written in Toronto, demonstrates an awareness of the latest efforts by English architects to transform the experience of education for teachers and pupils by challenging the hegemony of the classroom. However, Prangnell mostly considers the active role of objects in the educational process, a rare reaction for an architect. In considering the question of how schools might be, Prangnell reflects on the potential relationship between people, place and material things, declaring:

A school should be a marvellous receptacle, a marvellous volume or place between marvellously friendly objects, responding to – even initiating – unexpected uses that develop from the work in hand. The objects [...] must have a latent potential for exploitation matching the potential of exploring children (1969, p. 39).

In the recollected drawing of Dorothy Paull's classroom in 1969, we can see many friendly objects. We can imagine the activities that such arrangements of furniture and things were designed to support and sustain. The pupil is envisaged by means of these material arrangements as a collector, maker and curator as well as a learner.

## 6. "Making pedagogical spaces of enchantment" (Pyyry, 2017)

What the Paulls as teachers, Hawkins as scientist and philosopher and Prangnell as architect understood was an essential characteristic of childhood that was attracted by the look and feel of things and expressed in the act of collecting, curating and caring. As adults, teachers often needed reminding of this impulse in the very young in order that they might work with it rather than against it. In his book The Informed Vision (1974), Hawkins made connections between the aesthetic (the visually pleasing) environment and engagement arguing that "classrooms that are aesthetically dreary places are ones where children are bored" (Featherstone and Featherstone, 2002, p. 24). He contrasted these with British infant classrooms and clearly had Dorothy Paull's primary classroom in mind when he brought to his readers' attention a typical scene in which

children's murals, calligraphy and illustrated reports on scientific enquiries decorate walls ... and – when wall space gives out – hang from lines strung across the room at eye level, while found materials collected by children – shells, intriguing stones, moss and toadstools – line shelves and tables (Featherstone and Featherstone, 2002, p. 25).

But as *Yesterday I Found* sought to demonstrate, the availability of material objects from nature would never suffice without the skilled intervention of the teacher and especially powerful was the teacher's disposition as learner alongside the child. As the Featherstones put it,

A teacher who knows her subject matter and has learned to listen well can stock her classroom with concrete materials that beckon children into explorations of number, shape, pendula, inclined planes, growing things, and more – into scientific and mathematical investigations (2002, p. 25).

#### Conclusion

Lydia A. H. Smith has reflected on the many ways that this period was important in the history of American education. One of the ways she identifies was the importance in the professional lives of teachers and administrators of the experience of challenging and renewing practice (1988, p. 7). The research carried out for this article has illustrated the part played by an appreciation among progressively minded individuals of the aesthetic in promoting sustained interest, curiosity and engagement of both teachers and pupils in the primary classroom. These individuals included leading administrators, academics, advisors and teach-

ers as well as architects, publishers and designers on both sides of the Atlantic. The material arrangement of the classroom was observed in the 'testimonial' stage of American interest in the English infant and primary school to be a vital component which one needed to see for oneself in order to fully appreciate the workings of the school and the philosophy of education it espoused. Analysis of the demise of progressive education on both sides of the Atlantic has tended to report from a policy perspective. However, it is important to acknowledge how sustained these practices, principles and values were in the individual lives and relationships of those who were caught up in extensive travel, study and exposition of intimate stories of progressive classrooms over many decades.

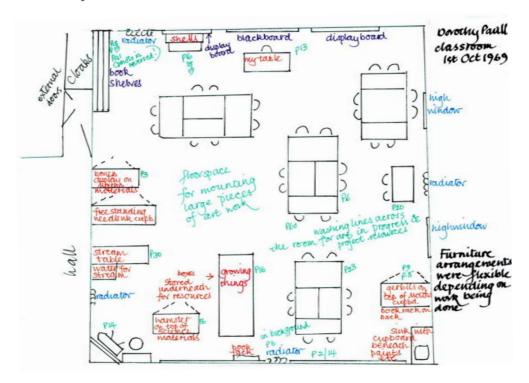
The Paulls separated in 1985 though each maintained strong friendships with each other and with the Hawkins and Tony Kallet until the end of their lives<sup>14</sup>. Initially they returned to England to teaching, teacher professional development and writing. Dorothy immediately took on the role of Acting Teacher Leader at Blaby Teachers' Centre, Leicestershire before becoming head teacher at Sheepy Magna primary school where at both centre and school she encouraged the same principles and practices as described in *Yesterday I Found*. Later she taught at Battling Brook primary school where she recalls that the arrangements of spaces for teaching and learning reflected the continued importance of the aesthetic in sustaining the relationship between people, place and things. In her final school, Heather Primary, which she led as head teacher for ten years until her retirement in 2000, Dorothy 'continued to use all the resources as described in *Yesterday I Found*, including the animals, within the relevant National Curriculum areas' 15.

John Paull returned to teaching and took part in the making of an award winning film, featuring six Leicestershire schools. The film "What did you learn in school today?", which demonstrates the full interpretation of environmental education, was the UK entry in the documentary section of the Chicago Film Festival and was selected by the Federation of British Film Societies as one of the outstanding documentaries of 1972. Together with Dorothy, he produced a series of books about

<sup>14</sup> David Hawkins died in 2002; Tony Kallet died in 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Archer email correspondence with author, 17/08/18.

science education for Ladybird<sup>16</sup>. Later, after seventeen years of headship in Leicestershire schools, combined with writing science programmes for schools television, John Paull was invited in 1996 to set up an alternative teacher education programme in Denver USA. Under the auspices of the University of Colorado he ran an innovative Masters programme designed to recreate the classroom teaching model of the 1960s. He retired in 2011. Today, John Paull lives in New Mexico and continues to write and run workshops about science education using his appreciation of the curation of small objects gleaned from the local environment, contained inside 'pocket museums'.



Dorothy Paull's 1969 classroom drawn from memory

16 These were: Simple Chemistry; Simple Mechanics; Air; Light; Magnets and Electricity; Insects and Small Creatures; British Mammals; Shells; Zoology; The story of the spider; The story of the ant; Nature takes shape.

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