‘Same, same, but different’: A comparison of rationales between historic and contemporary school garden development.

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KEYWORDS:

ABSTRACT:
School gardening projects are on the rise and as the current school garden movement reaches into its third decade, this is an opportune time to consider the involvement of Landscape Architects (LAs). As design specialists of outdoor spaces and environments they may be well positioned to consult and assist with designs that meet the educational, social and maintenance needs of schools. This is especially the case since school gardens have been proposed as a panacea for a number of concerns adults have towards modern-day children, including environmental education, healthy eating, spending time in nature and getting exercise outside.

Yet, interrogation of the history of school gardens reveals a paucity of their involvement then, as now. The school garden movement of the early twentieth century boomed, then bust with amazing rapidity, leaving behind a legacy among pupils of memories that were often not fond. These gardens were utilitarian and focused on production – often having a militaristic edge, as exemplified by the US School Garden Army. While they met the need of the era, they also strongly represented the adult agendas that drove them. Equally, the current movement is also driven by agendas, some the same and some different.

This paper uses the colloquial saying ‘same same, but different’ to reflect the similarity of the situation between the school garden movements of the 20th and 21st centuries – both in terms of the agendas behind them and the involvement of LAs. Its aim is to argue that greater involvement of LAs could optimise the learning potential of school gardens and therefore help to prevent repetition of the demise of school gardens, which are needed more than ever.
INTRODUCTION:

A recent contribution posted on the *In Field* blog site of the American Society of Landscape Architects claims the following:

A movement to green school grounds and connect students to nature is gaining momentum in the United States and around the globe, weaving the ideas of urban sustainability and ecological design together with academic achievement, public health, children’s wellbeing, sense of place, and community engagement. (Danks, 2014: para. 1)

Danks, herself an LA, is a passionate champion for school ground greening, and author of the how-to guide *Asphalt to Ecosystems*. School ground greening is the term widely used for establishing gardens and mixed plantings within schools (Dyment and Bell, 2007), and as Danks suggests, the rationales and benefits are myriad and confirmed by others (e.g. Williams and Brown, 2012). However, the issue being proposed in this paper is that professionals such as LAs are not often actively involved in helping school management develop masterplans and implement discrete projects to develop school grounds into places of biodiversity and experiential learning. Instead this is largely undertaken by schools themselves, and very often by individual teachers – with potential problems of disillusionment due to over-burdening and/or lack of knowledge (e.g. Passy, 2014), or the departure of the staffmember possessing the knowledge, so the process collapses. Schools are usually short of money, especially for ‘non-essential’ items such as gardens and creation of natural environments. Despite this, practice, supported by research, is confirming that greening school grounds can lead to positive learning outcomes, especially in maths, science and environmental learning, albeit there is unanimous recommendation for a more systematic approach to research (Williams and Dixon, 2013, Ozer, 2007, Blair, 2009). Research into participatory practices such as co-design, where school children and professionals work together on design and build projects (Parnell et al., 2009), is also indicating that children are natural designers and experts in their own environments. Including them in the masterplanning process and subsequent design briefs can unleash their creativity, develop valuable skills (including soft skills like communication), and lead to increased ownership of the space and empowerment due to feeling greater control over their learning (Sorrell and Sorrell, 2005, Wake, 2010). The environmental advantages are untold and generally not well researched. For
example: greater shading and cooling from planting trees and shrubs; food and shelter for birds; creation of insect, lizard and mammal habitats; restoration of stream courses and wetlands – all forming a more coherent corridor of green throughout cities.

Where do LAs fit within this and how can consideration of historical examples of school garden development provide lessons for today? As the following section details, previous school garden movements were driven by adult agendas that were different, but with similar motivations of concern over aspects of children’s lives as has been put forward in defense of contemporary school gardens. Since these modern concerns include children being disconnected from nature, unaware where food comes from (see Figure 1) and poorly equipped to take on future Earth Stewardship roles (Williams and Brown, 2012), they are issues of relevance for Landscape Architecture as a discipline and LAs as professionals representing that discipline. For example, the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects has a stated role as advocates for the environment as well as working for and within communities (www.nzila.co.nz). This suggests that LAs could be a resource for creating better solutions through proactive involvement in planning processes for school ground greening initiatives, therefore avoiding the marginalization that has hitherto and historically tended to occur, probably more by default than intentioned.

Figure 1: Contemporary school gardens can introduce children to food production in a relaxed and egalitarian environment of learning. (Author’s photo)

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PREVIOUS SCHOOL GARDEN MOVEMENTS:
School gardens as part of curriculum learning have enjoyed popularity before, albeit in a very different format. The original ‘children’s garden’ was Friedrich Froebel’s kindergarten model for pre-schoolers. This was a metaphoric rather than actual garden style which first appeared in Prussia in 1837, although Froebel’s lack of religious reference led to kindergartens being banned within Germany, so the idea prospered more abroad, taken by his supporters (May, 2006). There was heavy use of garden metaphors, with Froebel referring to “cultivating the garden of childhood” (quoted in May, 2006: 248) and “flowers were young children” (quoted in Robin, 2001: 87). Eventually Froebel’s system of ‘gifts’ and ‘occupations’, which focused on what adults deemed to be appropriate behaviour, fell out of favour due to its very
prescriptive nature, so while the name survives, his philosophy died out (Shapiro, 1983).

In the early twentieth century gardening and the benefits of outdoor exposure for children were embraced. For example, the McMillan sisters from industrial Bradford, in Great Britain were progressive reformers who devised a radical outdoor school programme called the Camp School that focused on the health-giving properties of the outdoor environment (McMillan, 1917). The McMillan sisters were concerned with social issues such as the plight of the working-class, especially children who were seen as in need of ‘saving’. Margaret McMillan (1917: 51-52) wrote:

This Camp is the biggest of all. It is in a wide and sunny place, nearly an acre of ground … It is the open space that matters. Our rickety children, our cramped, and even … deformed children, get back to the earth with its magnetic currents, and the free blowing wind … To let them live at last and have the sight of people planting and digging, to let them run and work and experiment … to get these things we sacrificed everything else.

In America in a similar era, Liberty Hyde Bailey’s Nature-Study Movement was likewise clear in its objective of giving school children the benefits of outdoor exploration, although it was intended to infuse their minds rather than bodies with the spirit of nature, and to lead to contentment with rural life as critical producers that would fuel urban and industrial growth. It was also overlaid with Bailey’s religious idealism that to be close to nature was to be close to God. Bailey (1909) wrote:

“Nature-study is a revolt from the teaching of formal science in the elementary grades.” (5)

“It relates schooling to living.” (34)

“A desire for school-gardens is gradually taking shape. This movement must grow and ripen: it cannot be perfected in a day.” (82)

“Nature-love tends toward simplicity of living. It tends country-ward. God made the country.” (52)

In the cities Nature-Study advocates and urban progressive reformers formed associations in the early years of the twentieth century, such as Fannie Parson’s International Children’s School Farm League, The School Garden Association
of America and the American Civic Association (Trelstad, 1997). The result was a subversion, nationally, of Bailey’s Nature-Study Movement into the American School Garden Movement, which attracted Bureau of Education funding from 1914-1920 and led to some significant-sized gardens being established, e.g. four acres and 1200 child-sized gardening plots in Philadelphia (Trelstad, 1997). Foregrounding of agendas by social evangelists who saw gardening for children and youth as a means to an end, not gardens as a designed end to a means, was evidenced by the lack of LAs involved in these projects. Although, as Trelstad maintains, some did advocate for garden and wild nature inclusion within schools and local parks, in general LAs, despite being experts in outdoor environments were largely uninvolved in planning the gardens, with the exception of a select few, eg Jens Jensens and the Olmsted brothers (Trelstad, 1997).

In the tension between the educational aims of Nature-Study and the social control focus of the progressive reformers, power generally leant towards the latter so the gardens came to be regarded as, “… a convenient means to achieve multiple social aims: city beautification, the reduction of juvenile delinquency, improved public health and nutrition, Americanization of immigrants, and the creation of good workers and citizens.” (Trelstad, 1997: 164). When America entered World War 1 (WWI) the United States School Garden Army received Federal funding and over 1.5 million students and 60,000 acres were involved in school gardens for economy and patriotism (Shair, 1999).

Significantly, demobilization following the end of WWI also heralded the inevitable end of the School Garden Movement, which Trelstad (1997) concludes as being primarily due to unsustainable expansion due to the war effort, followed by sudden withdrawal of funding that acted like a pinprick to a balloon. However, there are other cumulative effects cited, such as the growth of the suburb as a living concept and movement of gardens from school to home as a family activity, alternative social development recreational choices eg Scouts, and, not least, the reliance of the movement on teachers skilled in gardening and the lack of substantive professional support to integrate gardens meaningfully into curriculum learning (Trelstad, 1997). This trend continues
today, giving added reason for LAs’ input into the planning, design and management processes.

In New Zealand, the Manual and Technical Instruction Act of 1900 paved the way for the generally successful introduction of school gardens in many primary schools as the outdoor component of courses in Nature Study and Elementary Agriculture (Beaumont, 2002). However, as Beaumont (2002) points out, in keeping with socio-cultural attitudes of the day, they were also heavily imbued with moral lessons of character, citizenship and work-ethics building as well as being gender prescriptive, with boys tending vegetables (see Figure 2) and girls, flowers. As a departure from this social conditioning, Leonard Cockayne, New Zealand’s most famous botanist, was a strong advocate for native plant areas within school grounds, to be used in ecology lessons and appreciation of NZ’s unique flora (Cockayne, 1923). Sadly, the school garden movement gradually gave way to the convenience of asphalt and constructed playgrounds during the 1960s (Beaumont, 2002).

Figure 2: Historic school gardens were regimented and often gender prescriptive. (Source: The school garden, Masterton District High School, Feb 1907. NZ Graphic 15 June 1907, p. 8 [from Auckland Institute & Museum])

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:
Both historically and contemporarily school garden movements have been motivated by adult agendas regarding concerns they felt over children’s lives – from social buttonholing to nature deficit. The disadvantage of this is that agendas are effectively ‘fads’, which come and go – so school gardens are vulnerable as long as they are managed in this way. In a further situation of history repeating itself, Downs (2006) laments that LAs in the United Kingdom were largely uninvolved in the recent UK movement towards renewing schools. She was perhaps speaking of the Government-mandated Building Schools for the Future and Primary Capital Programme that ran from 2005-2010. This brief era saw an unprecedented input of students and staff in the design process, working alongside professionals such as architects to reimagine the school environment (Parnell et al., 2008). While the programmes were
discontinued, they have done much to further acceptance of children’s rights and capability to design the spaces they inhabit, in conjunction with practitioners (Burke, 2007). This has led to more mainstream acceptance of architects working with schoolchildren, but LAs have not had the same acknowledgement of the value they could bring to planning, design and management processes within school ground greening projects.

There are exceptions, for example Learning Through Landscapes, the UK charity that connects schools wanting to redesign their grounds with LAs who help with this (www.ltl.org.uk), and Akerblom (2004) certainly paints a different picture of the involvement of LAs in Swedish school ground greening projects. However, it seems relevant to suggest that perhaps LAs could be proactive in offering their services to schools, for example, as community outreach projects that may not generate much initial income, but are rich in reciprocal benefits. For LAs these would include; learning how to work with children and youth (Parnell et al., 2008), creating potentially better designs due to the input and creativity of the people who will use the space (University of Sheffield, 2014), potentially securing future paid work through positive profiling (Wake, 2010) and contributing to better planned school grounds that function as learning environments and can provide ecosystem services within communities (e.g. shading, cleansing of stormwater). This would contribute to fulfills professional responsibilities of LAs and could be used to promote the benefits in terms of maintenance through getting specialists to design school grounds rather than ad hoc planting by teachers and parents. With regards benefits for schoolchildren, there is evidence to suggest that the experience of participating in the design process is pedagogically transformational and deepens their connection to place (Green, 2014).

In conclusion, this paper has used archival and current literature to make connections between historical school garden rationales and contemporary rationales. In doing so, a cautionary tale is told, which, if heeded, could position landscape architects to significantly contribute towards leading the current school garden movement into a more pragmatic and sustainable future. As the focus of school gardens has shifted from a historic position of economy to a contemporary one of conservation (Akerblom, 2004), landscape architecture as a discipline is well placed to engage with
these issues, since school grounds form a valuable part of both the wider urban and rural landscape and an integral part of communities.

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REFERENCES


