Putting Play Back into the Playground

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ABSTRACT

During 2008 and 2009, a group of nine Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) from Canterbury met as a Community of Practice to investigate the way that play in the school playground contributes to the social competence of students. While the original concern was around the needs of students who were unable to manage their behaviour in the playground, the focus shifted to question how the school playground can be viewed as an important learning environment for all children.

The RTLB Playground Focus Group, as they were known, began by discussing the differences between play, games and sport. They collected advertisements and considered the impact that the marketing of toys and equipment has had on choices for play, including the demise of traditional games. Some members of the Focus Group informally surveyed their schools' reasons for changing break-times, the role of duty teachers, student voice, choices in the playground and strategies for the successful inclusion of all students in their playground. Survey participants were advised that the findings would both inform RTLB work in the region, and were intended to be published.

It was soon found that there is an enormous body of research around bullying and physical violence and play in early childhood, but very little concerned with the design or physical structure of playgrounds or the role of adults in the playground. Some researchers like Hickman (2009) and Leff, Power, Costigan, and Manz (2003) have explored children's perceptions and playground experiences in an attempt to assess the climate and school environment, and the balance of power between adults and children.

This paper was born out of the work of the Playground Focus Group, but also reports on issues confronting schools in relation to play and school playgrounds.

Practice paper

Keywords: *Community of practice, RTLB, school playground, social competence*

DEFINING PLAY

At an RTLB Canterbury Regional meeting the Playground Focus Group decided to invite the meeting to participate in a simple survey. About 50 RTLB were asked to define play using one sentence. They found it difficult but most included words such as: 'shared'; 'fun'; 'free'; and 'informal experience'. Sutton-Smith (1997) agrees that play is hard to define but claims that every child knows what it is but adults can only speculate. Pellegrini (1995) says that play is an activity done for its own sake which is flexible and fun. Play can be contrasted with exploration which may lead to play, work which has a goal, or games which are organised with the aim of winning.

Play is not only hard to define but also hard to find both in and out of some school playgrounds. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, adults can be over-anxious about children hurting themselves or others so the opportunity to explore and freely express themselves through robust play is denied. Secondly, many adults have been manipulated by persuasive advertising and the over commercialisation of toys and play equipment. Television programmes and promotions lead children to play according to rules imposed by adults (Klein, 1995). Thirdly, opportunities and places for children to make friends and play away from the control of adults are few and far between. The car ride to and from school has taken away one of the most important times for daily social interactions (Blatchford, 1998; Pellegrini, 1995). In many countries children rarely engage in street games or visit parks without adult supervision. Finally, time for playing outside in the school playground matters and does benefit children's ability to pay attention and learn according to research by Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1996).

However, break times are becoming marginalised and undervalued by schools reducing and regulating time for play. The Focus Group found that the decision was usually based on an assumption that negative behaviour would decrease and that the expanding curriculum requires more teaching and learning in the classroom. Little mention was made of the detrimental effect this is having on developing

skills in social competence. Such decisions devalue the playground and the social curriculum that exists in all playgrounds. (Hurni, 2001). There is no basis to support assumptions that play should be confined to the preschool years or that, at primary school, time in the classroom is of greater importance than play in the playground. Play is important because according to Perry, Hogan and Marlin (2000) it helps brain development in many ways. They believe that play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of children. It is a natural learning tool that develops co-ordination with both fine and gross motor skills. Because play is fun it helps to develop emotional well-being and stability. It includes rules of its own and allows children of all ages to develop skills in social competence that endure.

Frequently, adults see play through their eyes and they get in the way of friendships and children's play. Adults can take control and impose their own values, beliefs and ideas on children's play. This leaves few opportunities for children to be challenged or to discover solutions for themselves. Doll and Brehm (2010) say that "Adult's perspectives are shaped by mature ways of understanding and they have lost the ability to enter into the kids-eye view of play, games, friends and fights" (p. 39).

Teacher aides 'tracking' students can act as a barrier to the student's peer group and prevent, rather than foster, friendships. Adults can make well meaning decisions that are not in the best interests of the children in their care (Woolley et al., 2006). Even a pristine, landscaped playground can fail to provide adequate play opportunities for children if they have never been consulted or considered (Factor, 2004).

TRADITIONAL GAMES

Whatever happened to Oranges and Lemons, huts, marbles, swings and sandpits? Traditional games have all but disappeared in one generation. We are losing games that, according to Blatchford (1998), belong to children and have passed from child to child.

When children participate in traditional games, language functions like those needed for explaining or teaching the rules of a game are used. Oral language and pre-reading skills are supported through rhyme, repetition and memory. Children are focused, concentrating and aware of whose turn comes next. They practice good listening skills and rehearse some basic facts that require sequencing, such as the alphabet, counting, days of the week, months of the year or colours.

Social playground games are safe traditional games that are for everyone. Repetitive chants and songs make them easy to learn including circle games like The Farmer in the Dell, The Hokey Tokey, The Big Ship Sails on the Alley Alley Oh. Perry et al., (2000) has found that play increases all oral language skills including semantics, sentence length, listening skills and enriches vocabulary.

Children play with other children, not just those chosen by an adult from their class or restricted to best friends. Physical games develop fine or gross motor skills (Barbour, 1996). Games like knucklebones, marbles, pick-up sticks, rakau (Māori stick games), string games, whip 'n' tops, and yo yos increase hand-eye coordination as do many skipping and clapping games.

THE PLAYGROUND AND THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM

Take another look at your playground. You will see the Key Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007) in action with children relating to others, participating, contributing, communicating, thinking and managing themselves in a variety of situations. You may also see conflict, teasing, tantrums, anger, aggression and children left out. This is the place for teaching and learning the fundamental skills in social competence needed by all humans (Doll, 2009). This is the natural context for children to learn how to participate in socially-appropriate ways and when to use the rules that are basic to becoming a contributing member of our society. The life-skills developed through playing can be found in all of the Key Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007). The profile of an effective school will include a positive playground when teachers view the playground as a valued curriculum resource (Doll, 2009).

The Playground Focus Group listed the following skills from play as they explored connections with the Key Competencies. These are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Key Competencies and Behavioural Indicators through Play

Key Competencies	**Behavioural Indicators through Play**	
Participating and Contributing	*The Participant*	ask to join in learn from another
Managing Self	*The Manager*	understand and follow rules cope with winning and losing self-regulate emotions (e.g. anger) negotiate positive outcomes in conflict situations learn and use unwritten rules understand the outcomes of certain behaviour
Thinking	*The Thinker*	practice effective thinking skills be flexible in their thinking be able to find another way
Making Meaning	*The Communicator*	rehearse and develop oral language skills read the body language of others effectively listen to others and respect their points of view express what they want express what they need
Relating to Others	*The Cooperator*	take turns be able to adjust to change share be aware of the needs of others

CHALLENGES

When we consider that time in the playground is an important time of the day for students we get a new sense of urgency and impatience to make that time valued and with as much status for learning as the classroom.

Time in the playground can be negative for everyone including teachers on duty, as well as children who do not want to be where they feel unhappy, left out, picked on by other students or 'pounced on' by negative duty teachers. For many students, playgrounds are dangerous places especially when they are devoid of play equipment, and have insufficient play choices. The writer has observed playgrounds with limited equipment allowed for playground use or ineffective distribution of equipment from the sports shed, resulting in more children becoming involved with play-fighting, grass throwing, gangs/ cliques and bullying.

Some schools have relied on their adventure playground to provide play opportunities for their children. It can be popular and overloaded because it is all there is with very little 'play' actually happening. This is an exercise structure constructed by adults for children. One school, after considering data that showed this to be true, enriched their playground by creating zones led by classroom teachers. All over the playground, equipment was placed ready for use. This included cushions with books on the verandah, pickup sticks, marbles, stilts, skateboards, chess sets, cards, dress up clothes, skipping ropes with senior students to teach new skipping rhymes, frisbees, hula hoops, sand toys and hoses in the sandpit, water play troughs and easels for painting. All this, as well as two adventure playgrounds and the usual team games on the big fields, resulted in students who couldn't wait to get outside into a place that allowed them choices for play.

Banning of Games

Many games that require social and physical interactions have disappeared. Physical contact is too hazardous for some teachers' and parents' thinking. Students may get dirty, may get hurt, may end up with damaged clothes or worse may get angry or tearful or over-excited! If you doubt this then consider the games and activities that have recently been banned from schools in the UK: football, three-legged races, skipping ropes, tag and even making daisy chains.The Focus Group have found that some schools in their clusters are also into banning activities: marbles - because there are fights over possession; skateboards - because other students feel envious and skateboarders may injure themselves or others; sandpit toys - because of ownership squabbles and they are sandy at the end of the lunch hour; even sandpits in some schools because they haven't kept them safe from dogs or cats; tree climbing; rope ladders; swings; and bull-rush and all those games that require chasing and a lot of body contact.

Bull-rush and messy play activities can happen when students bring appropriate clothes with

parent agreement. Marbles can become a game of skill when students learn to look after their own marbles and learn to play the game and experience winning and losing. Sand toys can come to school when students learn to wash them at the end of play and take them home or store them at school. Skateboards can come to school if they are used in a specific place with safety equipment. Traditional games like Oranges and Lemons can return to the playground if they are taught.

Playground Duty - To Police or Participate?

The school-wide philosophy on both behaviour management and the value of play for learning and social development determines the nature and specific requirement of 'duty' for the playground duty teacher. Some school playgrounds are viewed as negative places by adults. Duty teachers can see time in the playground as an unwelcome but required task. There is a tension between managing behaviour and the school environment to keep children safe from injury and bullying, and making the playground an interesting and challenging environment where children can manage their own play. Schools often choose to 'police" or 'participate'.

Little and Wyver (2008) believe that avoiding all risks is not the solution as doing so limits children's participation in worthwhile experiences that promote their optimal health and development. They see the goal as managing, not eliminating, risk. However, in this era of apportioning blame, schools feel vulnerable if a child is injured. To protect their staff and children, some schools feel they have little choice but to 'police' the playground, maintaining a high level of vigilance to prevent accidents and aggressive behaviour. Interactions with children are limited to solving problems and enforcing playground rules, and are most often negative or directive. Blatchford and Sharp (1994) see that teachers are caught in a dilemma of wanting to be as non-interventionist as possible when on playground duty, whilst at the same time, having to respond with assistance to pupils. One consequence is that playground contacts tend to be officious and managerial.

Other schools are taking the opposite approach - they 'participate' in children's play, encouraging the development of language and independent social skills through positive interactions. If children have plenty of options to be creative, competitive, cooperative or just playful, issues with behaviour management are markedly reduced. In these schools teachers work as a team to provide equipment, teach skills and play with children, while still providing adequate supervision and giving attention to problem-solving. Teachers' interactions with the students are restorative, positive and respectful.

One school that considered the research of O'Rourke (1987) and identified the equitable distribution of equipment as a barrier to play placed all play equipment in big boxes around the playground for easy access. They increased the number of designated participating teachers/ teacher aides while decreasing the number of traditional teachers on duty. This resulted in a significant decrease in negative recorded incidents in the playground and positive teacher attitudes to 'duty'.

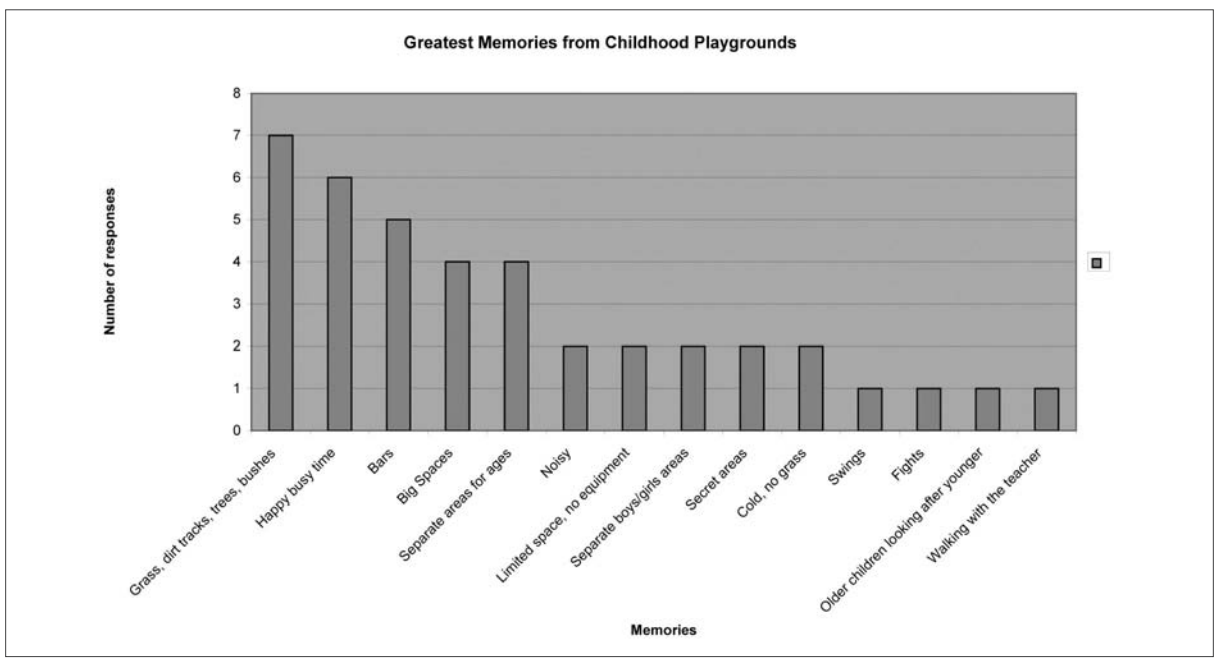

Figure 1 Childhood playground memories

The challenge for all schools is to achieve a balance between ensuring student safety through vigilant care over student behaviour, and facilitating student independence and social development through opportunities to engage in play.

MEMORIES

In spite of this negativity, time in the playground is still a happy time for most children and will be the most remembered time of their schooldays. Sutton-Smith (1990) claims that "The school playground still provides the one assured festival in the lives of children" (p. 5).

Figure 1 shows a summary of one-sentence responses written by approximately 50 RTLB describing their greatest memory of their primary school playground. The biggest responses were from those who were in rural playgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s. When the same group were asked to name the best game that they played, those recorded most frequently were: skipping and elastics; bull-rush; ban the door; and running and chasing games. These games were closely followed in frequency by: hopscotch; hut building; hide and seek; rounders; marbles, and the jungle gym. There was lively discussion among the group after this survey was collated and shared as the participants compared their playground experiences. Which activities and games will be remembered by today's children when they are adults?

CONCLUSION

Students can't wait to get into an interesting playground. These playgrounds let students 'feel the fear', handle disappointment, get a bruise or a scrape, try new things, experience winning and losing, and prepare themselves for taking risks and taking responsibility for their own lives. Schools that invest in their playground as a valued resource can focus less on punishing and banning, and respond more to the trends and social needs of their students. Teachers in these schools can choose to use restorative practices rather than a referral process, providing solutions rather than problems.

Developing friendships and having friends according to Blatchford (1998) is one of the most important features of every child's life. Playing in their school playground is where this can happen naturally and this includes students with disabilities or behavioural needs. MacArthur and Gaffney, (2001) remind us that the school playground is a critical social context for the development of friendships.

The playground satisfies the basic need of all children for social interaction with their peers, for play, fresh air and exercise. It is a school's most valued curriculum resource for learning and practising skills in social competence: the Key Competencies. The playground is not just a place for 'letting off steam.' It is a learning place where discovery, pleasure, excitement, imagination, fun and laughter abound. It is also a place where skills to manage conflict, anger and aggression are taught and learnt in context. By reducing time in the playground or placing the very students who need the skills in managing their behaviour out of the playground, a school is limiting learning opportunities for their students.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A playground audit can be the first step for a school to investigate what is actually happening in their school playground. It will help a school value what is already in place and most importantly enable decisions for change to be based on robust data.

During a 10 week teachers sabbatical in 2010, the writer developed *A Practical Guide to Conducting a Playground Audit*. Templates for gathering data are included in this document as well as examples from schools as they have worked to put play back into their playgrounds.

In 2010 the writer was invited to share the findings from using a Playground Audit at the 32nd International School Psychology Association Conference Trinity College, Dublin July 22nd-25th 2010.The conference theme was Making Life better for all Children.

To access the *Playground Audit* developed by Llyween Couper during a 10 week Sabbatical 2010 http://www.mps.school.nz/starnet/media/Our_Parents/Newsletter/Playground_Audit_with_pictures_28.4.10.pdf

Alternatively, go to the Mairehau School website www.mps.school.nz and click on "Our Parents", then "Our School Newsletter". You will find the Playground Audit and the power point presentation for 32nd International ISPA Conference, Dublin, 22-25 July 2010.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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Llyween Couper has been an RTLB in the Mairehau Cluster, Christchurch since 2004. Prior to that, she was the Regional Coordinator for the SE2000 Contract. She has an interest in models for delivering professional development and was a Cluster Facilitator for the INSTEP project and on the Advisory Committee for the Exemplar Learning Story project. She is an advocate for inclusion and presented a paper describing the RTLB model at the 31st ISPA (International School Psychology Association) Conference in Malta entitled "Strengthening Inclusive Practice in New Zealand Classrooms". In 2010 her focus for inclusive practice included the playground. She was invited to present a paper at the 32nd ISPA conference in Dublin titled "Putting Play Back into the Playground". Much of the content has been included in this article.

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