

Play in schools; Problems and prospects

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Thank you for inviting me to speak this evening. In a way it comes at an opportune time because I am just in the middle of reading research papers submitted by students who have completed a course I teach which is titled Children at Play. The students who do this course are nearly all primary teachers. They do it externally so it means that the students come from all over Australia (and occasionally overseas) which gives me a rare opportunity to read about what is going in playgrounds both here and far.

The title of my talk is 'problems and prospects' and I am particularly focusing on primary schools. I am afraid to say that what I see happening in primary schools leads me to be seriously concerned about the problems and rather less than optimistic about the prospects for children and their opportunities for free play during recess breaks. This comes about because:

1. Teachers, by and large, don't understand the value of play. Let me hasten to add that this is not entirely their fault because nothing in their training informs them about the importance of play in children's lives. They go through 4 years of primary teacher training and rarely ever discuss the playground other than their legal liabilities and duty of care. At best they might get a little Piaget in Developmental Psych but other than doing a stint on yard duty when out on the teaching rounds that's about the limit of what they learn about play. Not surprisingly when they graduate they join most other staff in schools who enjoy recess and lunchtimes because they provide a break but they detest having to go out and do 'yard duty' or 'guard duty' as many refer to it. It is worrying that many teachers feel quite uncomfortable, even intimidated, when out in the playground.

2. The second reason is that schools are under enormous pressure to provide children with a solid grounding in numeracy and literacy such that other curriculum areas (such as Art, Music, PE, Social Studies, etc) let alone play, are pushed to the margins. The dominant view is that playtime is simply a break between the “real” purpose of schooling. When we hear a parent say that children go to school to ‘learn’ not play we realise how much has to be done to change people’s thinking about the value of play. We still hear teachers talk about recess as a time to ‘release surplus energy’ even though that theory has been found to lack credibility (see Evans & Pellegrini 1997) Such are the pressures on teachers to fit all of their academic program into the school day that recess times are under scrutiny. Questions are being asked about just how much time is needed for each break. How many breaks are needed? We have gone from 3 to 2. We already know of schools in the UK and America that have abandoned morning recess breaks altogether because of the pressures of the academic curriculum and concerns about injuries and misbehaviour that occur in the playground. If there are problems out there then schools find that the simplest solution is to cut playtime. It is interesting to note that the Department of Education no longer includes in its guidelines to schools any reference to the number or length of recess breaks. They do, however, make quite clear the amount of time that has to be devoted to what they call ‘instructional time’. So schools are at liberty to make their own decisions about playtime.

3. The third, and arguably most troubling factor, is that the playground has come to be seen as something of legal minefield. We live in a society where parents are quick to lay charges of negligence against those they hold responsible for care of their children. They expect schools to provide a safe environment in and out of the classroom. Unfortunately they do not realise just how difficult it is to supervise 400 children in a playground nor are they particularly interested in being told. And waiting in the wings like vultures we have members of the legal profession who are quick to remind parents of their legal rights and who encourage them to exercise those rights (using their professional services of course).

To illustrate the lack of understanding about the value of play that exists in schools let me point to a couple of examples.

Rough & Tumble Games (R & T)

Over the last decade we have seen a considerable increase in the number of rules defining what, where, when and with whom children can and cannot play. Most, unfortunately, have had a limiting effect. Most schools, for example, have outlawed any games that involve tackling, wrestling, pushing or pulling, in fact any physical contact at all. This eliminates a whole raft of games that children, particularly boys, love to play. They are commonly grouped under the heading Rough & Tumble games. This includes not only all of the football games, but chasing and tagging games, and activities where children roll and wrestle and so on.

The schools ban these games because they are concerned about injuries that might occur or damage to clothing and property. On both counts they know that parents aren't at all happy if their child comes home with an injury or torn clothing as a result of R & T play at recess. They also ban the game because they cannot or do not wish to, distinguish between R & T play, which might include pretend fighting, and 'real' fighting with its associated anger and aggression. The latter is more likely to result in injury of a physical or psychological nature so it cannot be tolerated. It could also be associated with bullying which we know is a major concern for schools. There is also a concern that play fighting might quickly deteriorate into real fighting and so, to prevent this possibility, play fighting is banned. The research by Pellegrini (1987) and others (see Smith & Boulton 1990) in fact shows that it is very rare for this to happen. There is also a belief that play fighting encourages a child to be aggressive but, again, there is little evidence to show this to be true.

In a series of studies Michael Boulton (1996) in the UK, looked at the ability of lunchtime supervisors to distinguish between play fighting and 'real' fighting and he found that on many occasions they could not detect a difference. Schafer & Smith (1996) did the same thing with teachers and they also found that they had difficulty distinguishing playful from real fighting.

Injuries do occur in R & T play but infrequently and generally by accident. Clothing does occasionally get torn and dirty. But is this reason enough to ban these games which children love to play? The schools argue that they simply can't take the risk. In today's litigious climate, they are unwilling to risk being accused of negligence by allowing children to play games that might knowingly result in injury.

But let's look at the other side of the coin. What is lost when we place a blanket ban on contact games? Research shows us that R & T play is a vital part of children's (boys in particular) playground experiences. In a recent study Reed & Roth (2001), for example, found that R & T was a very important way in which boys developed and maintained friendships. Unlike girls, they found that boys tend not to engage in spontaneous hugging, touching, embracing. Instead they use physical activity to express their emotions. Grabbing, tackling, pushing, rolling and wrestling was actually their way of expressing friendship and care for one another. They wrote::

Rough and tumble play appears to be used by boys as camouflage for their desire for connection and friendship. As the expression for feelings and intimate contact are driven underground by cultural and social definitions, the drive to establish intimate friendships seems to resurface in R & T (p.11).

They go on:

The results of this research clearly demonstrate that young males do establish caring friendships. When boys are denied the opportunity to experience R & T they are also

being denied one of the few socially acceptable ways in which they can experience trust and develop intimate friendships with other males(p.12).

Reed & Roth describe an incident of R & T play. While watching the boys playing:

It became evident that physical contact was more important than just an accidental part of the experience. What once started out with several boys chasing another with a ball concluded with much physical contact that hardly involved the ball. The larger, stronger boys would allow others to grab their arms or legs and then drag them for several feet feigning a collapse.....after being tackled the boys would often linger on the ground laughing with their bodies touching one another (p.11).

They also write about an incident where one of the boys (named Perry) had his glasses knocked from his face after getting tackled fairly heavily. They noticed that;

Zach picked them up and shook the sand off them and gave them back to Perry. When asked if Zach cared about him Perry smiled shyly and said 'Yes' (p.10).

They also noticed that when a player was knocked down the game would stop to allow him to gather his composure. When they asked the boys why they did this they replied; 'Well we're best friends'.

So, on the one hand, we have some clear evidence of the value of R & T play but, on the other, we have schools being pressured to ban such activities for fear of accidents and injuries. It is also fair to say that most teachers and parents are unaware of the particular role this type of play has in the development of friendships and peer relations amongst boys. (Just as an aside it is interesting but hardly surprising that research is now showing that children are engaging in less active play during recess breaks giving rise to concerns about their poor fitness and health. I say hardly surprising because if you take away opportunities for games involving tackling and chasing or if there is not enough space for these games to occur then how do the children acquire and maintain any level of physical health?).

Even if schools knew of this research they would still be reluctant to allow such play for fear of parent objection or worse, legal action. We need somehow to be able to place this evidence in the public forum so that parents and teachers can see just how important these and other play experiences are for children. We need also to have access to primary teacher education programs so that we can help our future teachers become better informed about the value of play and how it is much more than 'just a break'. Let me move to another example.

Bigger is better.

The last Liberal state government decided that bigger schools would make better schools. Unfortunately they gave little or no thought to what the implications might be for children's play. I suspect that they never even looked at what it might mean for the children in terms of their playground culture and the fact that small schools provide a unique play culture that cannot be simply transplanted to a bigger school (Evans 1998). That in a small school cross gender and cross age play is taken for granted. Big kids look after small kids. Everyone gets to play. And in most small schools space and equipment are aplenty. Supervision is more relaxed. Teachers even play with the children. Children have a sense of freedom that kids in big schools can only dream about.

All of this came to mind the other day when I was reading a student paper. This person is a primary school teacher and he was describing his school and the changes that have taken place. It makes interesting reading. His school was designed and built strictly according to Departmental guidelines with buildings and playground space for 280 children. The school now has 540 children as a consequence of various amalgamations and the closures of nearby smaller schools. The additional students are catered for in portable classrooms brought in to cater for the burgeoning numbers. Guess where these classrooms have been put? Yes, space that was originally designed and dedicated to children for playing is now occupied by portable classrooms. So the school now has nearly twice as many children and half the original playspace.

And it is not just the lost space. As he explains many other problems have emerged. Rules had to be introduced banning children from playing near the portable buildings because there was an increase in the number of accidents from collisions. There are now more corners and obstacles which unwary children run into. Because children now compete for space there has been an increase in the number of disputes and conflicts. This in turn has meant that teachers have had to intervene more when on playground duty, something they dislike doing. All in all there are now more problems in the playground. The children are unhappy about the loss of play space and the host of rules which prohibit most of the things they enjoy doing. Teachers are unhappy because there are more disputes to deal with and there has been a noticeable increase in bullying behaviour which has been the subject of discussions with concerned parents.

In order to reduce the problems the school has experimented with segregated playgrounds, and the oval is allocated to certain grade levels each day of the week. They have also experimented with staggered lunch times to ease the congestion on the playground. While such rules can help with the management of the playground they reduce opportunities for cross age play which has been shown to be most important in the development of peer social relations.

Interestingly teachers also reported an increasing number of children wanting to stay inside at lunchtimes. They are asking to be able to stay inside to work on the computers or remain in the classroom to play board games, listen to music and read. Teachers don't want this because children cannot be inside without supervision but also they believe that children should be outside getting some activity at lunchtimes.

This is not an isolated example. I was recently reading a student paper where the teacher was describing an idyllic rural school which had 98 children and 6 hectares of playspace. Shortly after another teacher was describing her inner city school which had 450 children in 1.3 hectares and not a blade of grass in sight. Still another teacher was describing how her school numbers had increased from 350 to over 600. Many schools

are now finding that their playground space is woefully inadequate for the number of children attending the school. Bigger schools may have advantages in terms of the curriculum they offer and the learning facilities they provide but we appear to have overlooked their play needs and now we are paying the price. As one teacher remarked it becomes very difficult to engender a sense of 'community', a sense of 'caring and sharing', when the school is so large that there has to be segregated playgrounds, staggered lunchtimes and where teachers and children are constantly at loggerheads over the restrictions imposed on play.

Much has been said and written about the problems of bullying in schools. Schools have responded by putting in place extensive programs designed to reduce anti-social behaviour. We now have teachers on playground duty carrying clipboards and good behaviour stickers. Every incident has to be carefully recorded so that the school can respond to inquiries from parents. In schools where the playground is quite literally a battle zone teachers have begun to carry communication devices which link them straight through to the staffroom at the press of a button so that they can call on reinforcements in the event of trouble.

No-one seems to have considered that a prime cause of bullying on playgrounds might be a lack of things to do. Boredom is a major factor contributing to anti social behaviour. Bored children, out of frustration or simply lack of things to do, may find it amusing to tease, intimidate, and generally annoy other children and even teachers on duty. And there are plenty of boring playgrounds out there. When you remove all equipment that doesn't conform to safety standards; when you put in place rules which eliminate most of the things that children love to do; and when you populate a school with twice as many children as the site intended then we can't blame the children for getting pretty angry about the situation. If we spent as much time, effort and money on developing a stimulating play environment as we do on programs to counter bullying then we would have happier schools.

What is even more amazing and worrying is that we hear of schools, both here and overseas, that claim to have found the answer to problems in the playground by organising games for children during the breaks. In the Education Age today (October 24, 2001) there is an article about a school in the UK where children are being taught traditional games such as skipping, bat and ball games, marbles and hoops. And the Principal's comment is that 'these games are teaching children to play in ways that are more constructive and sociable'. Before the traditional games project had begun the Principal Ms. Frazier said 'she had been concerned about children playing wrestling games copied from television'. This is interesting. Once we might have called this Rough & Tumble play.

The language the Principal uses is interesting. 'Children learn to play in ways which are more CONSTRUCTIVE AND SOCIABLE! One might be tempted to say that what this really means is "ways which we adults approve of". What sort of school day is it when children's time is organised for them from the time they enter the gates until the time they leave.

We have schools here that are adopting, or thinking of adopting, this approach. I recently spoke with a Principal who was worried that the children seemed to wander "aimlessly" (his word) around the playground at lunchtimes. "They don't seem to know how to play", he said. When pressed about things like space and access to equipment and what he allowed and didn't allow children to do at playtimes, it quickly became clear where the problems lay.

When I read of schools going down this path I am reminded of Stephen Smith's (1990) delightful paper on risk and the playground. In it he cited the work of Wilkinson & Lockhart 1980, p.87) who claimed that it is possible:

to create an environment which is almost perfectly safe simply by avoiding risk. The problem is, however, that such a setting would not make a good play environment because it would lack many of those elements necessary for meaningful play; variety,

complexity, challenge, risk, flexibility, adaptability, etc. Quite simply such a playground would go largely unused.

Unfortunately we all know of many schools with playgrounds that lack these essential qualities and they do go unused.

In a recent article (Herald-Sun, October 21, 2001) the President of the Victorian Council of School Organisations Jacinta Cashens said that 'well intentioned plans to keep children safe were undermining efforts to encourage them to be successful by taking risks and being independent'. The increased effort to avoid injury threatened, in her words, to create a "joyless society".

Wendy Titman (1994, p.63) from the UK, makes the point that 'school grounds, by their design, and the way they are managed, convey messages and meanings to children which influence their attitudes and behaviour in a variety of ways'. She found that when children were actively consulted about what they would like to see in the playground this conveyed messages about the extent to which they, and the playground environment itself, were valued. On the other hand, when they weren't consulted, and when nothing was done to make the playground more interesting and fun to use, children saw this as implying the school didn't care.

We know this. We know about the value of 'whole-school' approaches (see Lewis 1998). We know about the importance of consulting the children in changes to the playground. We have people sitting here with us tonight who have been instrumental in helping schools to improve their playground environments.

In a recent article in the Victorian School News (Issue 3, March 2000) Ruth Neven wrote that schools are adopting what she calls a policy of "defensive education". In dealing with the problems arising in the playground schools all too quickly resort to restrictions and punitive measures largely designed to make the playground safer and supervision easier or, as we have seen, they set about taking responsibility for organising activities

for children to do at recess. The fact that such measures may further limit what, where and with whom children can play is, unfortunately, a secondary consideration. The challenge for us is to somehow convince the powers to be that play (of children's own making) and playtime are crucial and that rather than progressively eroding the opportunities to play we need to be searching for ways to enrich and expand them. In the current climate this is proving to be a very hard message to get across and will continue to be so unless we can change people's thinking about play. That is the challenge before us.

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