

## A class of young individuals ... like peas in a pod

Natalie Craig, Sunday Age

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THROUGH the eyes of an adult, it's a crummy old shipping container full of junk. But for school children, the "pod" is a portal to a world of fortresses and fashion parades, where monsters roam and designers blossom.

"He's the Mad Hatter and I'm the Hare, and we're having a tea party on this thing," said Romy Ellerton, 8, sitting beside a table-length bit of scrap rubber. "But before it was a parachute ... and a catwalk," said her friend Marko Pecer, 8, looking suitably mad with his hat over his eyes.

The pod "landed" at Beaumaris Primary School on Monday and has transformed lunchtime into a carnival of construction and creativity.

Play pods started in Britain and the US about four years ago. They have been found to improve children's decision-making, create more inclusive playgrounds, and reduce playground incidents. The pod's creators hope to secure enough funding from government or donors to offer, eventually, one to every school in Australia. "The pod is about not dictating to children how to play," said Marylou Verberne, head of not-for-profit group Play For Life Australia, which is conducting the trial.

"So much interaction these days is with a screen, so kids aren't building crucial social skills such as negotiation. You know, 'How do you and I build this fort together?'" Or, perhaps, make a dress for the spring races?

"You wouldn't wear this in winter ... I look more like a tropical girl, you know," said Lucinda Pezzimenti, 10, as she showed off her wrap-around print dress with rope-belt and cardboard hand-bag.

Nearby, another group of girls is building an amusement park for their toys using a network of ducting tubes, while some older children have clued on to the advantages of trade.

"Could we have this white thing for that coat hanger? And one pole please?" said Ruby Brake, 10, to a crazed pirate wielding multiple stick-swords.

Teacher Sarah Bracey said she had noticed children using their problem-solving skills since the pod's launch, but it was the freewheeling fun that was most striking.

"They just seem to be so pleased to be given permission to be creative and play, and to be free to be a child," she said. "There's so much pressure for them to perform well academically, on top of all the extra-curricular activities ... This is just freedom."

University of Melbourne primary education expert Jan Deans said schools were drawn to learning through play as a reaction to a crowded curriculum and the focus on national testing (NAPLAN).

"Play is very much in the spotlight at the moment," Ms Deans said. "Play is compromised, because children's lives are so controlled ... as a byproduct of the sophisticated world that we live in, and the environment of test-taking.

"We are grieving the loss of traditional forms of play that we used to consider a birthright - like making a cubby or mud pies in the garden."

While Beaumaris teachers admit the playground vibe could seem "a bit *Lord of the Flies*", assistant principal Jan Smith said students behaved "exceptionally".

Ms Verberne said nearby schools were already asking for their own pods but that the next batch would also focus on more disadvantaged areas.

"We're hoping to use play to achieve social change, and to engage those kids who are most at risk of dropping out ... We are built for play as human beings, but we're also built through play."