



## Supporting school improvement through play:

An evaluation of South Gloucestershire's  
*Outdoor Play and Learning Programme*

Stuart Lester, Dr Owain Jones, Wendy Russell

# Evaluation of South Gloucestershire Council's Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Programme

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Final report –  
February 2011

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Stuart Lester, Dr Owain Jones and Wendy Russell

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Front cover image: Bromley Heath Primary School, South Gloucestershire

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**'I have been in education for 15 years, and by a long way  
this is the most successful and rewarding project I have  
ever been involved with.'**

(Headteacher, School S interview)

## About the authors

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# Preface

**Michael Follett**, Play Advisor, South Gloucestershire

The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Programme provides mentored support to help schools create the best conditions for play in primary schools. Between 2007 and 2011 OPAL has been trialled in over 60 schools in South Gloucestershire, Bristol, Wiltshire and North Somerset. The Programme was developed while I was working as a school advisor within the Learning and School Effectiveness Service in South Gloucestershire's Council's Department for Children, building on my experience as a teacher and playworker.

For individual schools the OPAL Programme comprises over six days of meetings spread over one year. The process starts with a structured audit carried out by the mentor and the school together. The audit covers 18 critical cultural and environmental conditions which affect the quality of children's play. This is followed by an INSET day which informs the whole-school community of the Programme and brings together their agreed values and principles to form a play policy.

OPAL uses a structured development tool which allows the school and the mentor to work out a detailed development plan or play policy tailored to the specific needs of the school. This is followed by development meetings, held throughout the year, to support the school in embedding their plans and implementing them. Meetings are also held to inform parents of the changes the school will undertake to improve play, and to form a long-term plan on how to improve the school grounds to increase play opportunities. The final meeting in the Programme is the OPAL award audit, where progress is mapped, award status of silver, gold or platinum is agreed and the next development phase planned.

OPAL was developed in response to demand from schools for help in resolving issues at playtime, including boredom, high levels of accidents and playground incidents, lack of respect for supervisors and a constant stream of low-level behaviour problems, as well as a desire to improve the quality of children's play experience in school. Schools expected the resolution to lie in better occupation for the children such as playground games, behaviour management training for the supervisors or more equipment for the children. All of these were tried during the Programme's development, but none had a significant lasting effect.

Trial-and-error testing of the Programme over several years proved that the only effective and sustainable way to improve play for the majority of the children is through long-term culture change. The barriers to play are embedded in a school's culture and the ability to provide for play are far more connected with adults' culture than with the children or the obvious physical objects associated with play.

Each element of the Programme is developed to meet a different stage in the journey of culture change: the audit to provide sound knowledge of the school's starting point; the development plan to plot a clear path for the next few years; training meetings for all staff and parents to create a policy that is based on shared understanding; and grounds-planning based on how children play to ensure play value-for-money and coherent use of space.

This independent evaluation of OPAL commissioned by Play England and carried out by Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester and Dr Owain Jones, examines the effectiveness of OPAL in improving play opportunities for children in schools and how schools benefit from participating in OPAL.

Thanks are due to South Gloucestershire Council for investing in play within the Schools Effectiveness Service; to the headteachers in South Gloucestershire



who were prepared to take risks on play; to headteacher John Ridley for the name OPAL, and to Philip Matson for encouragement and support. OPAL is now a community interest company dedicated to improving children's opportunities to play, by providing services to schools and organisations in England and Wales.

# Foreword

**Catherine Prisk**, Joint Director of Play England

Play England exists to promote the right of every child to have adequate time and space to play throughout their childhood. This vision commands universal support and yet, in spite of extensive evidence that they are fundamentally important to children's well-being, learning and development, their play opportunities have become fewer as their lives have become more restricted and controlled.

Increasingly structured out-of-school lives and changes to the work–life balance of many families have limited the freedom to play that previous generations could take for granted. Where they still have free recreational time, traffic, crime and the fear of predators and bullies have conspired to deny children the choice to play outside to the degree that they tell us they want to and evidence tells us they need to. Consequently, it should be no surprise that children spend huge amounts of time sitting in front of TV or computer screens.

Policy influencers from all parts of the political spectrum have highlighted this issue. Most recently, a report by Respublica and Action for Children, *Children and the Big Society* (2011) argues that children being safer and more confident to play out in their local neighbourhoods is an important part of building the social capital that will make whole communities more resilient, cohesive and self-reliant. And it is well established that playing greatly enhances children's capacity to learn, innovate and negotiate.

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But there is a chicken-and-egg element to this objective. Children need the everyday opportunities to play with their friends in order to build the confidence to take the opportunities that may present themselves.

This is one important, often overlooked, role of the school. In the past, a child's school was one place where he or she was guaranteed at least a certain amount of playtime on a daily basis. What the old-style school playground lacked in imaginative design, most children were able to compensate for with the sheer exuberance that is expressed wherever they are allowed time to play freely with their friends. Playtime – in the morning and at lunchtime – was an immutable fixture of the school day: welcomed by adults as the chance for children to let off steam and relax, so as to be better prepared for the next lessons; grasped at by children as the best part of the day, where their friendships were formed and they were able to simply have fun.

There is growing evidence, however, that this important part of the school day – and crucial component of children's play lives – is being very significantly eroded (see, for example, Blatchford and Baines, 2006).

The social skills built up through free play are critical for children to function well in the classroom. Outdoor self-directed play is recognised by all the leading health organisations as one of the best forms of activity for children, both as exercise to build strength and reduce the risk of obesity, to develop the fine and gross motor skills children will need throughout life, and to provide good mental health. Access to green spaces, however small, has been shown to have a positive effect on children suffering behavioural or emotional disorders, and certainly common results of introducing more high-quality play outside are a significant improvement in behaviour and a reduction in reported bullying.

Finally, children need a level of challenge and risk in their play; they need to climb, jump and run. If they are not given challenging play environments, they will do

their best to create them themselves. The schools that introduce loose parts, trees to climb, policies that allow a level of play fighting and firepits have reported reductions in accident rates and, just as importantly, an increase in the children's confidence. Children left to their own devices will set themselves ever more challenging tasks – and will feel the pride that comes with achieving those tasks, whether it be standing on a tall tower of crates, climbing a tree or organising a mass castle-building enterprise. This confidence in themselves then spills over into the classroom and into their lives.

I was a teacher in both urban and rural primary schools throughout the 1990s. I've done my share of playtime supervision and after-school clubs, and kept children off the grass and told them to stop climbing on the walls. And I know the sound of 200 five- to eleven-year-olds towards the end of a damp winter lunch break when fights are threatening and the bolder ones are trying to sneak back into the toilets, while the hardy group of boys tries to take over an ever larger portion of the playground for their football game.

When I visited one of the schools involved in the OPAL Programme, I knew it was something special. Here was a school where, at the end of a miserable winter lunchtime, no one was trailing behind any of the lunchtime supervisors. There were no reported accidents. The sound was the hum and sing-song of happy, busy children having a great deal of fun. Two girls were 'rainbathing' on a hillock. Six boys of various ages were devising a complex game involving ropes and tubes of card. A large group were in the trees, some sitting in the branches. They had plenty of space because they were using every scrap of the outdoors, including the grassed area. When I asked about mud, the response was 'Wellies, indoor shoes to change into and mops. It's faster to clean up a bit of mud than to deal with the fallout of lunchtime squabbles.'

Play in schools need not be expensive: the majority of changes examined in this report are the result of simple changes in culture or policies, opening up unused spaces and making best use of resources and staff. Where schools have identified funding, especially where they see the value in terms of improved outcomes for children and more time for staff, the investment has mostly been in landscaping, training and in building up access to stuff to play with.

Schools are at the heart of their communities, they are where children spend most of their time outside of the home, and they are where lifelong friendships are forged. For many children the friendships they forge in the playtimes and lunchtimes of their school days will be there with them throughout life, and the playground games and experiences will give them the skills, capabilities and character to have both a great time growing up, and to build the resilience that will see them through the turbulent teens and into adulthood.

The OPAL Programme is just one example of a play programme that is being followed by an increasing numbers of schools across England. We are very glad to have had the opportunity to work with South Gloucestershire Council to commission this evaluation because it shows clearly the benefits that schools, their children and the wider communities can reap through investing in play.

# Executive summary

This research reports on an evaluation of the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Programme designed and delivered by South Gloucestershire Council as a way of enhancing children's opportunity to play in schools. The evaluation draws on a two-phased research process. The first phase considered documentary evidence from 19 primary, infant and junior schools, which participated in the Programme during the initial stages from 2007 to 2009. Then headteachers and lead staff from 10 of those schools were interviewed. The second phase consisted of interviews and focus groups with staff and observations of playtimes at 3 of the 10 schools. Key findings from the first phase of the evaluation were presented in an interim report. This final report builds upon that by combining the findings from both phases into an overall synthesis and evaluation of the Programme.

## Overview of OPAL

The basic aim of OPAL is to enhance opportunities for children's play in schools. Within the Programme play is defined as behaviour that is 'freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed', a definition drawn from Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005).

The justification for OPAL as an intervention recognises that play, based on this definition, is a right of children in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It acknowledges the evidence on the benefits of playing outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2 of the report, and shows an understanding of the barriers to play in school. These include curriculum demands and the culture of testing, risk-aversion among school staff, parental anxiety and poorly designed and restricted play spaces.

The OPAL project has developed a thorough, practical, step-by-step guide to developing the conditions to support play in schools. This includes comprehensive support materials, evaluated in Chapter 4 of the report, which offer key guiding principles for an approach to improving time and space for play. The audit process establishes a collaborative working relationship between the school lead for play (usually part of the school management team) and the South Gloucestershire Council (SGC) Play Advisor whose role is to guide and support the school in improving and enhancing existing approaches to children's play. The audit process offers a degree of quantifiable progress as the system includes initial (scored) audits and then follow-up audits.

The design of OPAL, although it lists universal and aspirational indicators and criteria in the audit process, acknowledges that schools will have different starting points in terms of the physical environment (buildings, grounds, perimeter structures, geographical location); size; community catchment area and relations; headteacher priorities; financial resources; staff culture, and more besides. Given this, the application of OPAL is not an absolute approach but is responsive to local conditions, and the nature and pace of change varies significantly across schools. This precludes the identification of any standard approaches and comparison across the OPAL participants. However, the review of documentary evidence, interviews with headteachers and results from the case studies do identify some key themes which have emerged through participation and these are further explored in the main body of the report.

## Key findings

The evaluation highlights the considerable benefits that have been gained from participating in OPAL. These include:

- changing the attitudes and culture of the school's understanding and position on play (particularly in relation to risk, adult control and all-weather play)
- altering the school grounds imaginatively and creatively in order to open up more possibilities for play
- changing children's play patterns, and encouraging greater variety of play behaviours and wider use of time, space and materials for child-initiated outdoor play
- increasing children's enjoyment of playtimes, with an associated reduction in perceived disruptive behaviour
- teaching staff to value the instrumental outcomes of the enhancement of playtime, particularly in terms of learning and social development.

The first phase of evaluation showed that all schools had made some progress in changing conditions for play. The second stage confirmed this and, in addition, highlighted the diverse and creative ways in which children use all the available space for playing. In the most successful schools, progress was transformative, changing the play cultures in schools very markedly, through involving people in the development of a play policy, providing training and mentoring for teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors, and embedding play into other aspects of school planning and practice. Other changes included redesigning the outdoor space, introducing flexible materials (loose parts), opening up areas and licence to play in a variety of ways and weathers. These changes led to children playing in more varied ways and engaging in a wider range of play forms, with fewer incidents and accidents reported during playtime, as children were 'too busy playing' to report minor events. Alongside this, training lunchtime supervisors meant that they were able to respond to issues as they arose and as a result incidents needing to be dealt with by teaching staff or the headteacher at lunchtime reduced dramatically (in some cases disappeared altogether). Teachers reported that children returned to the classroom ready to learn, with fewer playground arguments spilling over into class time, and some headteachers felt that the changes had contributed to enhancing the overall performance and culture of the school.

This high level of success results from a number of factors including:

- existing play policies that could be developed or enhanced in order to frame cultural change and strategic planning
- the presence of an enthusiastic and consistent headteacher who can bring staff, governors and parents with them
- school grounds with existing potential for play
- available finances
- schools which do not have to focus on other priorities (where other standards are generally high).

For some schools progress was slower, with contributory factors which include discontinuity of leadership at the school; the school's land, buildings and infrastructure being less amenable to the changes; or where the school may have had other pressing priorities of improvement in the school (for example, test results, behaviour or building improvement).

Alongside the overall culture change stimulated by the OPAL Programme, three elements are worthy of closer attention to encourage play in school:

- opening up areas for playing in all weathers through arranging for the provision of outdoor coats and boots and creating all-weather routes throughout the outdoor space
- ensuring that there is a plentiful supply of scrap materials that can be played with in any number of ways by children and that are easily replenished
- challenging the prevailing culture of risk-aversion among both teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors.

Staff responses to these changes were somewhat mixed and contradictory: all recognised the value of risk-taking in play and the principle of low intervention and free-ranging play, but some existing values and habitual practices that inhibit play are deeply embedded and will take some time to shift. For example, rules such as 'scrap-on-scrap' for play fighting were useful; their implementation by lunchtime supervisors was contingent on circumstances, suggesting a flexible approach.

### **OPAL in action**

Following the introduction of the Programme in 2007 the OPAL system has gone through a number of refinements in the light of the experience of working with a range of schools. The evaluation team feels that, overall, the OPAL pack and system currently made available to schools are highly effective in providing a sound basis for implementing changes to the conditions to support play. However, in some respects a further round of fine-tuning some elements is merited. It is also the case that as the political and socio-economic forces and trends that shape schools continue to change, OPAL as a process needs to have the flexibility to adapt to changing school cultures. In other words, OPAL is pursuing a moving target.

The OPAL Programme has an extensive range of materials and documents to support schools; however, it should be stressed that this is not a paper-driven approach. Merely following the audit sheets and support literature will not lead to the changes that have occurred. What the evaluation reveals is the significance of the external function of SGC and particularly the role of the SGC Play Advisor. Having someone external to the school providing the initial spur to action, followed up with authority from the council, supporting documentation, a council award scheme and so on, is essential for perceived legitimacy and the ability of headteachers to sell the Programme to staff, governors and parents. In addition, the particular strengths of the SGC Play Advisor's approach need to be acknowledged. In interviews, headteachers have consistently spoken of the SGC Play Advisor's enthusiasm and the inspiration, and motivation they have drawn from this.

### **Conclusions**

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that the OPAL Programme can deliver on its overall aim to promote outdoor play and learning in schools. It was evident in all participating schools that the interventions made by OPAL to both the physical and human environment enhanced and, in some cases, transformed opportunities for playing. This shows that the OPAL system can and does work in practice to achieve its stated goals. However, variations between schools in the extent to which physical and cultural changes have been made and sustained, together with the unevenness of take-up of the Programme across South Gloucestershire, show that there are challenges to the successful realisation of the OPAL aim in all schools. This evaluation identifies some of the factors that can contribute to successful realisation of the aim.

Given the importance of play in children's lives and current concerns about children's opportunity to access time and space to initiate their own play outdoors, there are considerable benefits for children, parents, schools and the wider community from participating in the OPAL Programme. The design of OPAL establishes some clear guiding principles and strategies for initiating changes to playtime. The Programme is thorough and practical and has been trialled, developed and modified through implementation in schools. The results can be transformational and – at best – spectacular, and show progress even in more challenging school environments. Changes are not exclusively reliant on large capital investment and encourage creativity and responsiveness to local conditions and needs.

OPAL supports schools in developing a cultural shift in thinking about and supporting children's play. Its success emanates from a series of interrelated actions, with continuous specialist support from the Play Advisor, which embed play in policies and practice. It is this feature that is likely to sustain the approach beyond the initial impetus and keep play at the heart of school developments.

Schools, as local community-based provision in which children spend a considerable amount of time, are responsible for the education and well-being of the whole child and, given the importance of play in children's lives, have a responsibility to ensure sufficient time and space is made available for play within the school day and beyond. Given the reported benefits of participation, the OPAL Programme is also worthy of consideration for wider application across South Gloucestershire and other local authorities, independent schools and academies.

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### **Policy implications**

In the current public spending climate, and given the coalition government's moves towards devolution of power and community-based budgeting, we feel it is important to note that:

- OPAL does not require large amounts of (central) funding, and many of the improvements it can engender can be achieved at little cost (for example, changing the rules about how children use open play areas in school grounds or making use of old or decommissioned school and household resources for play). A range of funding sources has been used by schools, from school budgets to fundraising by parents and other local funding possibilities.
- OPAL is very much about pump priming school capacity to become self-sufficient and self-directing in how they support play in schools rather than imposing a central system on them. What is important is the culture change; changes to physical features and time and space made available for play need not be costly.
- Schools are a significant community resource and, for some schools, participating in the OPAL process has both increased parental involvement in schools through involvement in design, contributing materials and so on, and has also offered a valuable play space for other organisations, with, for example, grounds being used for community-run holiday playschemes and after-school clubs.

Research shows that play contributes to children's physical and emotional health, well-being, approach to learning, and enjoyment of school. Projects like OPAL, which pay attention to the conditions that encourage and support children's ability to play in schools, can reap benefits for children, schools, local communities and society more generally.



# Chapter 1

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## Introduction

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### Context for the report

This report offers an evaluation of the changes to schools that have been brought about through their participation in the OPAL Programme. It includes a review of the Programme documentation (both general and also relating to the 19 schools which participated in the first rounds of OPAL in 2007/2008 and 2008/2009), subsequent follow-up telephone interviews with 10 of these schools, and the findings from case studies carried out in three of the participating schools during November/December 2010.

The evaluation project has three interrelated aims that evaluate both outcomes and processes:

- an evaluation of the changes that have occurred through participation in the Programme
- an evaluation of the conditions that have contributed to its successful implementation
- a review of the OPAL Programme and the value of this in supporting schools to transform approaches to children's play.

### Overview of context and the importance of play in school

There are currently widespread and legitimate concerns for the well-being of children in the UK.

As the Conservatives' (2008) *Childhood review* highlights, the UK was ranked bottom out of 21 of the world's richest countries in terms of child well-being in UNICEF's child well-being league table (UNICEF, 2007). There are well-reported concerns about children's health (both physical and mental), obesity, lack of independence, and more besides (Lester and Russell, 2008, 2010). Central to these concerns about the condition of childhood is the decline in opportunities for children to find time and space for play. Prominence is generally given to adult-organised and purposeful activity which may run counter to children's desire to play with peers in spontaneous, opportunistic and unpredictable forms. Tovey comments:

**Admission to primary school at a younger age, and the rapid growth of nursery, child care and after-school care means that young children's lives are increasingly institutionalized. Out of school care is often located in school environments, under close adult supervision with, in many settings, organized activities replacing free play. The growth in after-school activities, such as clubs, sports, or extra lessons, can mean that**

**many children's leisure time is increasingly structured and organized by adults with less time for children to initiate their own play. The length of playtime in many primary schools has been reduced amid concerns about children's behaviour and opportunities for play are limited by the pressures of a centralized curriculum.**

**(Tovey, 2007, p.2)**

School playtimes are widely acknowledged as an important period of the school day when children have the opportunity to engage with peers in a variety of playful activities that are relatively free from adult intervention (Blatchford and others, 2003; Jarrett and Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003; Holmes and others, 2006; Pellegrini, 2009; Ramstetter and others, 2010). It is estimated that approximately seven hours per week of a child's time at school is spent in the playground, equating roughly to a quarter of the school day (Pearce and Bailey, 2011). Historically, playgrounds have always taken a secondary role to the main business of education and schooling, but there has been a growing interest in what Pearce and Bailey (2011) refer to as the 'use/misuse' of school playgrounds which represents two opposing perspectives: the 'romantic' view of the playground as a space of enjoyment and learning contrasted with the 'problematic view' that portrays the playground as a site for bullying, challenging and disruptive behaviour, and gender inequalities. To this divide may be added a more recent perspective, the 'public health' view which places value on playgrounds for health-related physical exercise (for example Ridgers and others, 2007; Bundy and others, 2009). Overall, there is a growing appreciation that playgrounds and playtimes are a significant feature of a child's everyday experiences in school.

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Such periods offer children time and space to feel, think and act in ways that are significantly different from the structured classroom and to reap the associated benefits in terms of general health, development and well-being. Crucially, when they talk to adults about what is important in their lives, space and time to play outdoors has shown to be at the top of the list of children's desires and preferences (Kernan and Devine, 2010).

Play is a universal phenomenon and the significance of this behaviour is recognised in Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). As the Charter for Children's Play states:

**The school day should allow time for children to relax and play freely with their friends ... In school, time and space for play and outdoor learning is as important as formal teaching. School grounds should be good places to play.**

**(Play England, 2009, p.3)**

The central importance of play in children's lives and the contribution that playing makes to children's development and well-being are at the heart of the OPAL Programme. The initiative acknowledges that schools should be enablers of children's play opportunities for three basic reasons:

- Play is a fundamental right of children and central to their well-being, health and development and therefore schools have a duty to provide play opportunities to the children in their care, as recognised in Chapter 6 (1) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.
- Providing opportunities for children to play in school is particularly important given the constraints on play opportunities in children's lives outside schools.
- Creating attractive spaces and allowing time for children's play has beneficial effects in terms of key school priorities such as children's enjoyment of school,

individual and collective behaviour, personal development and educational achievement both individually and collectively, and in pupil–staff relationships.

School grounds should be viewed as an integral part of wider concerns with children’s health, development and well-being, and provide a valuable resource to support families and communities. Given the current public spending context and policy moves towards community-based decision-making and budgeting as an aspect of the Big Society, the OPAL approach merits serious consideration in terms of how it enables schools to take their own initiatives, often at quite small, low-cost scales, but which over time can build into a substantial and highly beneficial change in school cultures and beyond in terms of play provision.

### **Overview of the OPAL Programme**

The OPAL Programme supports schools in enhancing opportunities for children’s play, both within the school day and outside of school hours. The OPAL information pack states that the basic aim of the Programme is to ‘enable schools to become exciting, challenging and inspiring places for children to learn and play outdoors’. The guidance given on the process acknowledges that schools will be at different levels in the support they give to children’s play: ‘some schools will already have developed a culture which supports play; others will be very cautious and wary of change’ (OPAL Advisor’s notes, p.1). The intention of the Programme, therefore, is not to provide an ‘absolute’ and prescriptive tool that has a standard and universal technical application but rather to offer a framework for schools to enable them to work towards implementing changes in line with the principles developed in the Programme through a collaborative and developmental process tailored to each school’s unique situation. This highlights the importance of a personal rather than a procedural approach, suggesting a significant contributing factor to the success of the Programme is an enthusiastic and authoritative advisor who is external to the school’s own staff team.

The design of the OPAL process has developed from 2007 and now contains a clear rationale and aims for the Programme. The process involves an initial collaborative audit of the site and the production of a jointly developed and agreed action plan.

Again, the key message is that this is not a prescriptive tool and the audit/ action plan process should be situated within the unique contexts and constraints of individual schools. In supporting schools through the process there are a number of documents and tools that were used in a negotiated process between the SGC Play Advisor and the school lead(s). The underpinning concepts, language and application of these are discussed in more detail in ‘Audit tools and next step action plans’ in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 2

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# The case for supporting play in schools: what the research says

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It is evident from reading the OPAL documentation that the primary intention of the project is to focus on children's opportunities to play during the school day, as well as on the environment in which children spend their playtimes. As the Advisor's notes outline:

**The premise of OPAL is that play is an essential part of childhood and a right, it has many benefits and that it requires time, resources and planning. As children have lost the opportunity for freely chosen social play in the outdoors much of the time out of school, it has become increasingly important that schools understand how to create the necessary conditions for play in school time and in school grounds.**

**(OPAL Advisor's notes, p.2)**

Other OPAL support documents elaborate on this by stating that 'play is the elemental learning process by which humankind has developed' (Developing a play policy, p.1), and that play has evolutionary and developmental value for survival. The guidance also comments that children 'use play in the natural environment to learn of the world they inhabit with others' (Developing a play policy, p.1). Such a claim for the importance of play, both for children's development and as a right, would find general support from literature across a number of disciplinary perspectives.

Ramstetter and others' (2010) extensive review of research into school playgrounds concludes that playtime offers a critical period in the school day during which children can have a break from the rigours of academic challenges, and that this unstructured time provides a unique contribution to children's social, emotional, physical and creative development. Given this, they conclude that playtime should be considered an important part of the school day and should not be withheld as a form of punishment or seen as secondary to the demands of an academic curriculum.

This chapter reviews some of the literature pertinent to the OPAL Programme across a range of topics: the nature and benefits of play, play and learning, outdoor play and health, attitudes to playtime and the design of school playgrounds.

## The nature and benefits of play

Play has been studied across a wide range of academic disciplines, each with its own perspective. Analysis of recent and historic policy initiatives (Cranwell, 2003; Santer and others, 2007; Powell and Wellard, 2008) shows that although there is no coherent understanding of play, and policies largely take an instrumental view of its nature and benefits. Direct causal links are assumed between particular forms of playing and the acquisition of particular skills (social, emotional and cognitive) or the amelioration of social problems (for example, obesity or anti-social behaviour), with adults directing children's play towards those specific forms of playing and therefore the desired outcomes (Lester and Russell, 2008). This approach pays attention to the content of children's play, its outward expressions, reading these literally as practising skills for adulthood. But what much of the research shows is that play's value lies in children's subjective emotional experiences of playing (for example, Burghardt, 2005; Spinka and others, 2001; Sutton-Smith, 2003). Rather than rehearsing skills, children appropriate aspects of their daily lives into their play and turn them upside down in an attempt to gain some control over the world by rendering it either less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith, 1999). The enjoyment that this process affords is what provides the motivation for playing; these emotional experiences support the development of resilience across a number of areas such as emotion regulation, stress response systems, attachment (to people and places) and to a flexibility of responses to what children encounter (Lester and Russell, 2008).

## Play and learning

Varying conceptualisations of play give rise to considerable and diverse research which links play activities to a range of developmental benefits. Studies, largely from the discipline of developmental psychology, converge to establish a common 'play-learning belief':

**Play, in its many forms, represents a natural age-appropriate method for children to explore and learn about the world around them ... Through play children acquire knowledge and practice new skills, providing a foundation for more complex processes and academic success.**

**(Fisher and others, 2008)**

There are a wealth of texts that propose a relationship between outdoor play and learning (see for example Bilton, 2005; White, 2008; Perry and Branum, 2009). This also finds expression in a range of policy guidance for schools and beyond: for example, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) places strong emphasis on the value of children's opportunity to play outdoors to support learning and all aspects of children's development, noting that being outdoors has a positive impact on children's well-being, as it provides the opportunity for doing things in different ways and on different scales from being indoors.

Research studies suggest that playtime, and opportunities to be playful in an unstructured environment, play a role in children's adjustment to school, classroom behaviour and approaches to learning (Jarrett and others, 1998; Pellegrini and Bohn, 2005; Pellegrini, 2009; Barros and others, 2009). Pellegrini (2009), drawing on a cognitive immaturity hypothesis (Bjorklund and Pellegrini, 2000), notes that for children breaks during the school day, which provide the time, materials and space to interact with peers, should maximise the attention they pay to subsequent tasks. This is supported by results of controlled field experiments, and has led to a call for frequent breaks throughout the school day. This is also supported by the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) which proposes that time spent in 'effortless' pursuits and contexts is an important factor in recovering from mental fatigue.

Scott and Panksepp (2003) suggest that children's rough-and-tumble play offers them the opportunity to engage in bouts of high energy activity, reaching a peak of satiety, at which point children may be more receptive to participating in less vigorous social and learning opportunities. Other studies (for example, Freeman and Brown, 2004; Reed, 2005; Pellis and Pellis, 2009) show how rough-and-tumble play makes a significant contribution to the development of social competence and friendships.

Yet, as suggested in the previous chapter, the benefits of play arise from its unique qualities of being spontaneous and unpredictable, and these qualities manifest themselves when children can find the time and space to play away from direct adult gaze and surveillance; the more natural and unstructured the environment, the 'richer children's play is as an educational activity' (Farné 2005, p.173). Santer and others' (2007) literature review cites research which found that if play is allowed to develop, it becomes more complex. Appreciating this perspective suggests that effective play environments provide the space and time for children to create moments of their own design and intention, rather than being directed into adult desired and designated spaces and activity. It is somewhat inevitable that there will be tension between this reading of play and the nature and context (including historical) of educational provision, as recognised in much of the literature discussing play in schools and early years setting (for example, Adams and others, 2004; Santer and others, 2007). Understandings and applications of play in contemporary educational policy place great value on the importance of identifying 'what counts' in terms of good quality play, and then apply these methods and activities as a means to support children's educational progress and achievement. While policy documents may espouse the value of children's 'free play', they are often couched in terms and practices that reify the instrumental value of this behaviour (Lester, 2010). School spaces and time are highly regulated, with the need for adults to keep 'control', raising questions about the ways in which schools acknowledge and seek to manage these tensions.

## Play and health

The state of children's health in the UK is a cause for considerable concern, in particular the dramatic increase in overweight and obese children (Boseley, 2005; BMA, 2005; Almqvist and others, 2006), as recognised in the Conservatives' (2008) *Childhood review*. There is irrefutable evidence that regular physical exercise is effective in primary and secondary prevention of chronic disease (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity and depression) and that healthy activity patterns are established in childhood (Brunton and others, 2005; Ahrens and others, 2006; Warburton and others, 2006).

Children spend a significant amount of their daily lives in school, and as such schools have a central role in promoting and supporting children's activity and health (Pangrazi and others, 2003; Ahrens and others, 2006). Considerable research pays attention to the relationship between children's play, health and physical activity (Batch, 2005; Burdette and Whitaker 2005; Cleland and others 2008; Ramstetter and others, 2010). Mota and others (2005) suggest that school playtime is an important setting in which to promote moderate-to-vigorous activity. Research studies into the relationship between playground design and health suggest that sites which have 'advanced landscape features' have a higher degree of satisfaction for children and lead to more physical forms of play and associated health benefits of lower Body Mass Index (BMI) (Ozdemir and Yilmaz, 2008). Pupils' perception of the school environment appears to be directly related to their satisfaction with the playground, and greater satisfaction promotes more active behaviour (Fjortoft and Sageie, 2000).



Yun and others (2005) indicate that environments that have a dynamic range of variables are likely to have significant health benefits, and Fjortoft's (2004) study highlights the benefits associated with playing in a natural playground compared with more traditional play environments. Numerous studies highlight the benefit of children having playful access to natural space (Moore and Wong, 1997; Louv, 2005; Spencer and Blades, 2006; Lester and Maudsley, 2007) and there are suggested links between children's opportunity to play with natural elements and their care and concern about environmental issues as adults (Bixler and others, 2002; Lohr and Pearson-Mims, 2005; Wells and Leckies, 2006; Ward Thompson and others, 2008).

Studies from the field of environmental psychology also intimate that playful contact with natural space offers moments of fascination and a chance to 'be away', and may support the restoration of attention, necessary for concentrated and task-directed effort in the classroom (Kaplan 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan, 2005; Taylor and Kuo, 2006). Play, in particular social forms of rough-and-tumble play, may also have considerable benefits for the reduction of impulse control disorders such as ADHD (Panksepp, 2007).

Given the relationship between play and health, and the increasing concerns over children's fitness and activity levels, there is a tendency to see playtime as a period for promoting structured physical exercises and games, yet as Ramstetter and others' (2010) review indicates, such moves undermine many of the social, emotional, cognitive and even physical benefits of unstructured play.

### School attitudes to playtime

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While there has been increasing attention given to play and outdoor environments in the early years, the notion of 'playtime' in school has attracted mixed opinions. In an educational culture that has seen an increasing emphasis on outcomes and achievement, playtime has been given lesser value and, as a consequence, school playtime allocation is reported to have been considerably reduced (Blatchford, 1998; Armitage, 1999; Pellegrini and Bohn, 2005; Blatchford and Baines, 2006). Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) suggest that by curtailing playtime, schools may be reducing one of the few times during the day when children have the opportunity to interact with their peers in a generally unsupervised manner.

Playtimes are often a source of concern for teachers who perceive this unstructured period of the school day as a time when children become aggressive and unruly (Lewis, 1998; Armitage, 2005). Pearce and Bailey's (2011) study of playtime in a south-west London primary school tellingly notes that 'risk' was a serious concern among the teaching staff, particularly around the impact of bullying, yet the authors' observations and discussions with the children offered no support for this concern.

Of equal concern is risk anxiety among teachers about injury in the school playgrounds, leading to the removal of play equipment, the reduction in playtime and the implementation of constraining rules designed to restrict children's use of school playgrounds and force 'teachers into a policing, litigation-conscious role' (Bundy and others, 2009, p.33). From their study of the introduction of loose parts into a primary school playground in western Sydney, Bundy and others (2009) note that while the teachers saw a considerable and beneficial change in children's play patterns, they also perceived that risks to children's safety had been increased through the introduction of these materials. This promoted some interesting comments from teachers about their unease:

**'I suppose at times I was noticing [risk] because it was there and it was so different. I don't know whether there was more risk or whether I was just noticing it more' and 'I suppose because it seems like grown-up equipment**



**with little pieces of wood and tyres and everything, you're a little more tentative to start with'. Given that the incidence of injuries did not increase during the study period, it seems fair to say that concerns arose more from perceptions of what might have happened rather than from what had actually been observed. One teacher summed up her concerns by saying, 'something could happen to somebody – I think that's a teacher's natural instinct to be worried that something could happen'.**

**(Bundy and others, 2009, p.40)**

In response to this general unease, which is underpinned by the fear of litigation, teachers adopt a range of strategies. These include direct requests to stop a particular activity, to remove materials that they perceived were dangerous, to reduce numbers of children in certain areas, and to intervene to discuss the situation with children to raise awareness of the consequences of their actions and to encourage reflection. Teachers also acknowledged that children themselves were good at responding to possible risks. But overall there was a degree of tension in relation to the use of the new materials and, as Bundy and others comment, 'sometimes it seemed that teachers were managing their own anxieties rather than the risk itself – for example, "the majority of the time, while I was nervous, I'd still sort of let them go through whatever"' (2009, p.41).

Another issue of concern highlighted by research relates to adult perceptions of children's rough-and-tumble play. Children, in particular boys, view this as an attractive form of play and report that they can readily distinguish between play and real fighting (Smith and others, 2004). However, despite evidence to show the contribution this form of play makes to friendships and social competence, for teachers and playground supervisors this form of behaviour is problematic, with many believing it always 'gets out of control, leads to bullying, feeds aggression, and would open them up to risk of legal prosecution if a child were to be injured' (Freeman and Brown, 2004, p.224). Smith and others (2004) suggest that play fighting may result in real fighting in about 1 per cent of cases (although this may be higher for those with poor social skills), yet teachers make a considerable overestimation of this, citing a figure of 29 per cent. In looking at possible causes of this overestimation Smith and others suggest that some teachers find play fighting noisy and intrusive and prefer quieter and more orderly forms of play; have concerns about accidental injury; and generalise experiences of play fighting turning into real fighting to present universal accounts of this form of behaviour.

Thomson (2003) refers to primary school playgrounds as 'well-equipped hamster cages' in which the rationalisation of playgrounds through design processes that encourage specific use of space exclude opportunities for freedom of expression. In response to adult concerns over playtimes, increasing control has been introduced by the 'teaching' of traditional games as a means of productively engaging children in 'play' in a manner deemed worthwhile by the adults involved (Armitage, 2005; Smith, 2007). Thomson's (2007) small-scale review of three primary school playgrounds notes that the outdoor space exerts a significant influence on the child's everyday life at school, yet this space is designed, produced and governed by adults. Studies have shown that within the playground, children's ability to play is severely restricted by adult promotion of what is expected and by sanctions imposed against children when they contravene this promotion (McKendrick, 2005; Thomson, 2007).

These promotions and constraints are underpinned by concerns around children's safety (and fear of litigation) and management of children's peer interactions to promote adult expectations of sharing, cooperation and a general 'play nicely' approach. Children perceive the adult negativity about their

activities and generally accept that this represents the norms of behaviour in this space, and attempt to fit in with the general adult remit of the playground. Yet by 'limiting children's natural and spontaneous interaction with their environment we stunt their environmental knowledge, expertise and aesthetic pleasure' (Thomson, 2007, p.498).

Despite the fact that children's playtime accounts for a significant portion of the school day, there is limited appreciation by adults of the importance of this time for children's health and well-being (Blatchford and Baines, 2006).

### Playground design

Alongside this are issues related to the nature of playground design. Frost (2006), commenting on playground design in US schools, notes that while they tend to cater for motor play, they fall short in any features that integrate garden and nature areas, constructive play materials and props for imaginative and creative play. Rasmussen's (2004) research with children highlights the limited value that children place on school playgrounds, and playground designers should acknowledge this and plan for children's multiple possibilities rather than adult-determined notions of how space should be used. 'However, to most adults connected with the modern primary school what actually happens at playtimes remains a complete mystery' (Armitage, 2005, p.552). Factor notes children will incorporate and adapt the physical elements of the environment to their own needs and purposes in play: 'youngsters create an intricate network of usage, play-lines invisible but known to every child at the school' (2004, p.142).

There is a significant research base that addresses the key features of attractive play spaces (Titman, 1994; Lester and Maudsley, 2007; Moore and Cooper Marcus, 2008) which now permeates much of the discussion around design of outdoor play environments. The significant elements of this may be summarised as:

- In some way spaces need to be physically defined and enclosed but offer the possibility of variety and movement. This resonates with Ward's (1978) and Sobel's (2002) discussions on the role of dens, secret spaces and private spaces in children's play landscapes (also see Kylin, 2003; Powell, 2007). Armitage's (2005) study of playground design reveals that regular and open playgrounds appear to promote one specific form of play (running games) rather than a variety of play possibilities. Spaces, although bounded, are not done so in too inflexible a way and children can find space at the margins as well as the middle.
- The form and material of spaces can be manipulated and be made 'polymorphic' rather than 'monomorphic'; that is, space can be put to differing uses at differing times (and even differing uses in parallel). Play spaces are liminal and remain open for future possibilities for play (Matthews and others, 2000).
- Spaces should contain a range of malleable materials that are non-specific, 'ordinary' and 'polymorphic' (eg sand, mud, sticks) for use by children, rather than 'commercially' designed play products which are often overburdened with adult prescription (see, for example, Nicholson, 1971; Moore, 1986; Powell, 2007). Bundy and others' (2009) study of the introduction of loose parts into a primary school playground clearly establishes the impact on children's play patterns, noting the increase in more physically active play, not only in terms of aerobic exercise (running, jumping) but also in resistive activity (pushing, lifting, carrying, rolling materials around the playground). Their research notes:

**One teacher observed that children who had previously tended to prefer sedentary activities were now more active as a result of the materials.**

**Another teacher explained the increase in activity via reference to her perception that children's play 'had more of a purpose' following introduction of the materials. There was unanimous agreement that children's play became more creative as a result of the intervention. Moreover, play was perceived to have become progressively more creative as exposure to the materials increased over time. Children were reported to have made inventive use of the materials' potential for construction (e.g. building a 'pyramid'); exploration of mechanical properties (e.g. rolling balls down planks); combining with their own toys and with pre-existing equipment and 'ball bag' items; creating spontaneous rule-based games (e.g. who was allowed to climb on a built structure); creating friendly competitive games (e.g. tyre-rolling contests); testing physical prowess (e.g. 'balancing' on tyres or walking along planks); and creating highly imaginative play (e.g. sitting in tyres 'pretending [to be] on some Caribbean cruise').**

**(Bundy and others, 2009, p.39)**

- Children have a particular attraction to natural environments. Numerous studies have found that they often prefer to play in natural or wild spaces (Tranter and Malone, 2003; Lester and Maudsley, 2007). The need for elements of nature is particularly important in three respects: natural spaces and substances often tend to be polymorphic and infinitely malleable (Powell, 2007); natural spaces are freer from adult prescription and therefore lend themselves to children's imaginative appropriation (Lester and Maudsley, 2007); research also suggests that contact with natural space and elements supports children's fascination with the world and affords the opportunity for the restoration of attention (Taylor and Kuo, 2006).
- The wider landscape of the school should be taken into account as well as specific existing or proposed play areas. This includes opening up the possibility of making differing routes through the school landscape and between play areas. This likens to notions such as Moore's (1986) 'flowing terrain' and Jones' (2008) discussion of how the geographies of children's lives and play need to be able to permeate through dominant adult-designed, scaled, ordered and controlled landscapes in order that they can in effect develop a parallel other world of spatial imagination and practice in the same physical spaces. Such a perspective also suggests that the world of the playground may remain hidden from adult understandings, by the very nature of children's play (Factor, 2004).

### **Wider issues**

As the OPAL documentation intimates, there is an apparent general reduction in children's opportunities for freely chosen outdoor play. It is now generally recognised that across Europe (although to varying degrees) children find little time in their daily routines to be away from adult gaze and direction (Kytta, 2004; Lester and Maudsley, 2007; Skar and Krogh, 2009). There are multiple and complex factors that have reduced children's opportunity to independently claim time/space for themselves, including wariness of 'strangers'; increased traffic; pressured expectations that they are purposefully engaged and in the right place (Valentine, 2004; Veitch and others, 2006; Karsten and van Vliet, 2006; Lester and Russell, 2010). Many children are accompanied to school, organised clubs and activities by adults at the expense of having time to be away from supervision and surveillance (Thomas and Hocking, 2003). However, we need to be cautious with making generalisations about the changing nature of children's access to their local environments and children's desires do find time/space for multiple expressions in everyday routines, as this varies considerably across variables such as location, class, gender and so on (Lester and Russell, 2008). The point

here is that with the changing conditions and demands of everyday life many children may experience a reduction in the variety and amount of time/space available to them. Given the great concern about contemporary childhood, schools should have a responsibility to facilitate children's play not only as part of the developmental and learning opportunities that underpin effective education but also in terms of their wider responsibilities to children, families and local communities (Moore and Cooper Marcus, 2008; the Conservatives, 2008).

Collectively, this research underpins and fully justifies the claims and approaches developed in the OPAL Programme and provides a rationale and incentive for schools' participation in the project.

## Chapter 3

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# Methodology

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The essence of the evaluation is to assess the extent to which the OPAL Programme meets defined objectives and delivers benefits or impacts as a result. In doing so, and appreciating the underlying approaches to the OPAL Programme, the evaluation needs to pay attention to the contexts and mechanisms as well as the changes that have occurred over time; 'what works' will be a reflection of the complex systems that make up the context of application (history, people, physical environment and other key variables) (Pawson, 2006). Nevertheless, what emerges may have some underlying central themes in relation to the process. The evaluation employs inductive and interpretive qualitative methods to collect and analyse documentation and the perceptions of participants in the Programme.

These key principles provide a framework to guide the evaluation and to ensure that as comprehensive and robust an evidence base as possible is established within the limitations of the project (see 'Methodological issues' below), one that provides rich material from which to draw conclusions and recommendations. Given this, the focus of the evaluation is on how the Programme is understood and experienced by participants, and the framework for the evaluation comprises the following elements:

- inputs: the support of the SGC Play Advisor, the documents that capture the key principles of the Programme, and the influential figures in the schools (together with the skills and understanding that accompany these inputs)
- activities: the OPAL audit and action planning process
- outputs: the changes have been made from the activity across the five key themes of the OPAL Programme
- outcomes: the consequences for children and adults as a result of the changes made; it is acknowledged that 'outcomes' in terms of children's subjective play experiences can only be guessed at, but this does not prevent us from drawing some well-informed conclusions.

The evaluation is based on topics defined by OPAL and uses a thematic approach to build up a picture of the interpretation and application of OPAL materials. The sample of 19 schools for the first phase was selected by the SGC Play Advisor as they were considered to be representative of the schools that were engaged in the first two years of the Programme (during the school years 2007/2008 and 2008/2009). Of these, 15 were primary schools, 2 were junior and 2 were infant schools. Headteachers from 10 schools from this group participated in telephone interviews. This initial phase was followed up with detailed case studies of three schools selected, using the following criteria:

- The schools must have fully participated in the first stage of evaluation, both through submission of documentation and via telephone interview.
- The schools must have completed a 'final audit'.
- Case studies were limited to primary schools rather than separate infant or junior schools, to enable some broad inferences to be made.
- The sample would include a 'flagship' school and one in which changes had been made that required little financial investment.
- The schools must have expressed willingness to participate.

### Data collection

Data collection was broken down into two main phases. Phase one (which generated the interim report) and phase two.

Phase one of the evaluation employed two approaches:

- **Documentary review:** To gather an impression of how the OPAL Programme operates the documents that were produced to support implementation were examined and the evidence collected through the audit process (audit sheets, action plans, award decisions) was reviewed. This was further developed and enhanced by a review of available additional non-standard and idiosyncratic documentary materials associated with each school (minutes of meetings, relevant policies and guidelines developed from the process, newsletters and so on).
- **Telephone interviews:** To follow-up the documentary review structured interviews were undertaken to gain significant impressions and gather experiences from headteachers (or nominated key members of staff) to learn more about responses to the audit, action planning and implementation processes. The basic premise of this stage was to gauge the initial motivation for participation, how the schools went about doing it, and what happened as a result. Open questions were designed to employ an interpretive approach, encouraging participants to elucidate their feelings, experiences and observations within the domains established by the OPAL project.

Phase two consisted of three case study schools. The use of the case study approach at this stage was designed to draw on key findings from Phase one, namely that the enhancement of opportunities for children to play in school is not simply a physical design intervention but involves complex interactions between a range of adults and children who are involved in everyday encounters in the space, and through this to co-produce the 'playground' and playtime. A range of research activities were designed to further elicit adult perceptions of the changes introduced by OPAL and to observe children's use of time, space and materials in the playground. These included observations of children's use of the outdoor areas at various times of day (including before and after school), as well as interviews and focus groups with headteachers, teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors.

Once gathered, the data were organised into categories to draw out key themes, and to identify any patterns or associations.

### Methodological issues

At this point it is worth injecting a note of caution: given the complex nature of children's play, and adult understandings and actions to support this, it is not possible to make clear cause-and-effect claims of effectiveness, although well-informed (or better informed) inferences on the possible changes that have been brought about by participation and interventions can be suggested.



The timing of the initial phase presented some challenges. The delay in appointing evaluators and the need to submit an interim report by late August necessitated interviewing headteachers at a time when they were focused on end-of-year activities. In addition, the documentation available to carry out the interim evaluation was not consistent across the period under review, since it has developed over time, nor was a comprehensive analysis of documentary data across all 19 schools possible due to inconsistency of documentation and its availability.

It is important not to see the Programme documents as isolated and static materials. Their status as documents depends on the ways in which they are integrated into actions and interactions, and they can only be reviewed in this context. Documents are produced by someone, in this case by SGC Play Advisor, for a specific purpose, ie to enhance the provision of play spaces for children in school. They are a form of communication and the evaluation process seeks to examine the messages within the communication and how effectively they are received, understood and acted upon. As such, the documents utilised in OPAL are viewed as significant contextualising information which is further elaborated upon by interviews with headteachers involved in the Programme. In the review of documentation we have also included relevant extracts from notes of interviews to elaborate on some of the key findings.

Phase two was limited in scale by the project resources which meant there were limitations to the data gathered. Although the analysis of documents and interviews with headteachers were valuable, this second stage offered an opportunity to observe the ways in which children played and also allowed for more in-depth dialogue with staff involved.

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Given the limited time available to carry out these three case studies, it should be acknowledged that there were corresponding limitations to the evidence collected, particularly through the observations of children's play, including:

- Weather conditions: the period of observations (November and December 2010) coincided with snow and icy conditions which obviously influenced children's use of the play spaces, as can be seen by the ways in which children created slides down slopes, used PlayPod (see page 41) equipment as sledges and snowboards, threw snowballs, had snowball fights and so on.
- Observations: The focus of observations is to gather impressions of children's ability to use the available time/space for playing. As an outsider, and given the size of the play spaces within the schools, it is difficult in such a short period of time to discern the play patterns that emerge during playtimes; it is very much an instant snapshot and attention is drawn to activity that occurs for shorter periods of time. What is difficult to gauge are all the ways in which children use time/space for 'doing nothing', those times when children are simply being together, chatting, walking around the playground and so on, in between the activity. However, what is evident from these limited snapshots are the diverse and creative ways in which children use all the available space for playing.

It should also be recognised that there is a fuzzy connection between data collection and analysis and as the review of documentation was undertaken some themes started to emerge that also informed the further collection of data through the interviews with headteachers. These insights are valuable for the analysis stage, bearing in mind the importance of not drawing premature conclusions. Following the initial period, analysis also offers the chance for more data collection and the interim report informed the second stage of the evaluation.



## Chapter 4

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# Analysis of Programme documentation (as an element of the inputs)

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Given OPAL's clear focus on improving the conditions for children's play in schools, an essential feature of the Programme is the way in which understandings of play are articulated and represented in Programme documents. This chapter is divided into three parts, the first looking at the support materials schools can use in developing spaces for children to play, the second examining the audit tools used in the Programme, and the final chapter paying attention to the development of school play policies, since these documents provide an illustration of each school's understanding of play within school. In practice, the development and audit tools work together; similarly, the culture change that the play policy documentation aims to support cannot be seen in isolation from the physical changes.

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### **OPAL support documentation**

OPAL's design and underpinning principles are represented through a range of materials and processes, analysed below:

- *OPAL Advisor's notes on the audit and action plan* is an outline of the approach taken to support schools in implementing the OPAL Programme. These notes provide a detailed explanation of the intention of the process and identify some significant principles for supporting the approach with schools, including the 'supportive challenge' role of the advisor. There is an explicit acknowledgement that each school will be unique in both the existing support that is given to children's play and its capacity to enhance this provision. The notes clearly recognise that 'play is an essential part of childhood and a right; it has many benefits and requires time, resources and planning', and this is consistently reinforced throughout this document. While this document is labelled as 'notes for advisors', it also has the potential to offer great value for schools as it gives a very clear overview of the approach and the ways in which the five key themes of the audit process connect to transform the approach to play within the school day. This general outline of the rationale, principles and approach could then be referenced to the other support materials included in the OPAL pack (identified below).
- *Developing a play policy and strategy for the school* highlights the importance of articulating the principles, policies and practices which underpin a whole-

school approach to improving the conditions for children's play. Given the somewhat contested nature of understandings of play (as suggested in 'The nature and benefits of play' and 'Play and learning' in Chapter 2), this guidance clearly outlines the relationship between the 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' nature of play and the role of play in healthy development. Key principles are further elaborated by recognising that play is the process of a child's own self-directed learning and is critically important; as such, schools should take account of actions and decisions and their potential impact on children's opportunity to play. The final principle included in the play policy makes a clear statement about the benefits of being exposed to some levels of risk and signposts schools to the Play Safety Policy Forum statement and *Managing risk in play provision implementation guide* (Ball and others, 2008). This aspect of OPAL is looked at in more detail in 'Risk, safety and interventions' in Chapter 5.

- *Play landscape design principles and design tool* describe the principles for designing attractive play spaces and an outline for applying principles in play space design. This document resonates well with the key themes discussed in 'Playground design' in Chapter 2, recognising the need to design spaces that are open to the possibilities of play rather than for single purpose use. Again, the principles and advice are implicitly underpinned by a range of concepts that might find support from, for example, Noren-Bjorn (1980), Moore (1986), Hughes (1996), and Kytta (2004). In addition, the approach taken here reflects much of the literature on the provision of outdoor play and learning environments: for example, White (2008, p.3) suggests six major ingredients that combine to create a 'full menu of rich and satisfying outdoor provision for young children': natural materials, growing and the living world, playing with water, physical play and movement, imagination and creativity, and construction and den building. Key features focus on children both being and acting in space, and the properties of environments (affordances) that potentially enhance play value. Although it pays attention to the physical design features, there is a recognition that landscapes need to be considered as social spaces; spaces are not simply a physical container for activity but are socially produced through everyday encounters, symbols and materials and perhaps this needs to be given a higher profile in the documentation. It might be suggested that a cultural shift in adult thinking about the nature and value of children's play and playfulness will inevitably create a different 'feel' of space which is likely to lead to a greater 'field of free action' (Kytta, 2004) for play.

Taken in isolation from the OPAL process, the design tool document appears to be somewhat idealised, technical and prescriptive, suggesting a degree of environmental determinism, implying that certain features will promote certain forms of play. Given the general OPAL principle of working with the unique context of each school, it is important that the design and conceptualising of the new play spaces and networks builds from the existing landscape of the school (built and natural) and seeks to work imaginatively with the affordances of this space. Rather than looking at a blank canvas, some attention should be given to mapping and observing children's existing use of available play spaces at the start of the process, bearing in mind that children's value and use of space for play may not always be readily discerned by adults. Both Factor (2004) and Armitage (2005) illustrate how adults can sometimes ride roughshod over special places that have been used for play, for example, the drainpipe that was always the counting pole for games, or a small crack in the tarmac, or what Factor refers to as 'play-lines' of the playground. This point was emphasised in one interview where the headteacher commented that the design tool is very prescriptive, saying that every school is different and it would be helpful if the audit tool was designed to respond to the school's current position and builds

from this. That said, the design tools document is used alongside a developmental and support process that does acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of each school.

- *OPAL play survey* is a tool for children to express their feelings, experiences and ideas about playtime. The principle of consultation with children is established in the OPAL Advisor's notes, along with recognition of some of the problems and limitations of this in relation to the age of the children and limitation of their experiences. Given that children's play is a perceptual, emotional, cognitive and behavioural response to the environment, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for children to represent this to adults. The 'traffic light' tool offers a quick and simple way to gauge children's responses, but it has limited value and there might be some concern that a more in-depth and qualitative investigation of children's experiences are not in the system (see the previous point about appreciating how children currently use the playground), as this may reveal a very rich and varied set of children's experiences. Caution should be employed in assuming that children can and will articulate their play preferences in a way that adults can understand, and approaches that try to appreciate children's own perspectives should be taken. These might include observing how children use the environment for play, and the use of tools other than direct questioning (for example, cameras and story boards) (see, for example, Clark and Moss, 2004; Gutteridge and Legg, 2009).
- *Ground development ideas* provide practical examples of playground features. These serve as good practical examples of things that can be done and link to the list of suggested elements in the design tool. These ideas are all represented by photographs, most of which are of specific sites and/or play activities and, again, are consistent with themes developed in Chapter 2. However, a number of the photographs show equipment or landscaping with no children in view, and this creates a 'catalogue' feel to the document. By doing this, and with accompanying claims about the value of play, there may be a danger of establishing causal links between playground design and children's actual playful use of the equipment which contradicts some of the key principles developed in the Programme, particularly the notion of design for openness and to establish a field of free action (Kytta, 2004). The inclusion of photographs of children using equipment and space in ways that might challenge adults' imagined ideas of children's use does help to counter this (for example, the photograph of the picnic table).
- *Guidance note: risk assessment of free range play*, designed jointly by the SGC Play Advisor and the SGC Health and Safety Manager, provides a rationale for approaches to support children in 'free ranging' in their play, that is, to access the available spaces and materials without direct supervision. The guidance offers a typology of supervision practices and poses a series of issues to be considered in schools developing an approach that may involve 'ranging supervision'. This practical guidance enables schools to consider a range of risk factors to take into account when arriving at an informed judgement on the school's ability to support elements of 'free ranging'.
- *Step-by-step checklist* outlines the key stages in the OPAL process and the associated actions which should be accomplished at each stage, providing a valuable overview of the process.
- *Principles of playwork* is designed to encourage schools to use the skills, knowledge and principles of the playwork sector in areas of school workforce development. Again, this is consistent with the overall aims of the OPAL Programme and emphasises the importance of creating a cultural shift in understanding and practice around children's play.

Analysis of this material suggests that this extensive range of products covers key principles and concepts associated with transforming approaches to school playtimes. Collectively they offer a rationale for why playtimes are important and offer practical guidance on implementing changes across the five key themes of the audit process discussed next.

### Audit tools and next step action plans

The process of initial audit, action planning and final audit provides the framework for translating into practice the principles developed in the OPAL documentation. It enables schools to identify their starting position with regard to supporting children's play in consultation with the SGC Play Advisor by paying attention to the following five key and interrelated areas:

1. Leadership and planning
2. Access and inclusion
3. Play value of the environment
4. Care and maintenance
5. Staffing.

Completing the initial audit leads to the collaborative compilation of the 'next steps' action plan, a central tool in the OPAL process that indicates key areas for development to improve conditions for children's play. This action plan also forms the basis for the final audit of the school to ascertain what actions have been completed and what has emerged from this process.

Seven schools in the first tranche of nineteen schools in the evaluation sample became involved through OPAL's predecessor, namely the 'Grounds for Play' initiative, in the academic year 2007/2008. Although they followed a similar initial process, these schools did not participate in the formal OPAL initial audit and therefore baseline figures are not available for these schools.

For the second wave of 12 schools that began the Programme in the academic year 2008/2009, there are results available from the initial audit and the final award score, which enables a crude analysis to be drawn between start and end points. It should be reiterated that the intention and nature of the scheme is to work within the contexts and constraints of each individual school, and the award audit is a negotiated process of self-assessment with support from the SGC Play Advisor. Given this, attempts to produce a statistical analysis from the final scores would have limited benefit in terms of assessing effectiveness.

Working with the documents supplied, four schools have an audit trail that shows their progression through the OPAL process:

<i>Name of school</i>	<i>Initial audit</i>	<i>Final audit and award</i>	<i>Percentage progress</i>
'G' Primary	47%	Silver – no final score available	Not known
'C' Primary	39%	82% Gold; 94% Platinum	55%
'I' Primary	63%	93% Platinum	30%
'B' Primary	55%	80% Gold	25%

Table 1: Progression through audit process.

In addition to this, from the documents supplied, the following schools have been awarded a 'final' award grade

<i>Name of school</i>	<i>Final audit and award</i>
'N' Infants	80% Gold
'S' Primary	97% Platinum
'K' Primary	67% Silver
'O' Primary	75% Gold
'E' Infants	79% Gold
'L' Primary	77% Gold

Table 2: Final audit scores for school with no initial audit score.

For the remaining schools in the sample, some have undertaken the initial audit with the following results:

<i>Name of school</i>	<i>Initial audit</i>
'H' Primary	57%
'P' Primary	40%
'M' Primary	50%
'J' Primary	51%
'R' Primary	63%*

Table 3: Initial audit scores.

For the remaining four schools in the sample, there was no documentary evidence available of the initial or final audit stages. This is likely to be because of the difficulty in obtaining the documents at a busy time of year.

Follow-up interviews with schools revealed that most placed great value on the audit process, illustrated by the following observation:

**The structured self-evaluation form is excellent because it highlights in a very simple way what needs to change. These are often very obvious and small things but the structure of the form works very well.**

**(School E)**

Equally, School O notes that the structure of this process was valuable and enabled the school to take a thorough and systematic approach; the scoring system was useful as it created an instant impression and provided feedback to inform the action plan.

### **Supporting information: play policies**

The OPAL Programme is designed to initiate a whole-school approach to change the overall institutional culture and conditions for children's play. Documentation emphatically suggests that attention is paid to perceptions and attitudes as much as to the design of physical space, and makes reference to the 'cultural conditions' that support play. This is a somewhat intangible feature as it

\* This figure represents an interim, rather than an initial, audit as the school wanted to check on progress.

represents a greater sum than the individual parts of the Programme. Drawing on the approach adopted by Beunderman's (2010) evaluation of play provision, it is suggested that if play has beneficial effects and is relevant in and of itself, then the primary variable in terms of accruing the benefits of play should be children's ability to access time/space for play (rather than assumed instrumental benefits to be drawn from particular forms of playing). It is perhaps through the school play policy that this cultural shift is first formally articulated (bearing in mind the dilemma of representing this in a written format); again the Advisor's notes comment 'that without a policy decisions are being made by each individual and are therefore inconsistent for children'.

There was wide variation among the sample of seven policies reviewed in terms of articulating and framing the vision for play, which highlights the previously mentioned tensions between instrumental and intrinsic values of play. For example, this school's play policy states:

**Our policy on play ensures a consistent and safe approach to all outdoor activities that promotes happy learning.**

**(School N)**

This approach also percolates into the expectations of how specific areas of the playground might be used and the associated learning benefits, as shown in this example:

**The climbing frames and trim trail provide an area of intense activity for both infants and juniors and encourages the cross-fertilisation of age ranges the school prides itself in. The large playing field area allows the children to play team games including football, volleyball, cricket and rounders. The playground markings extend imaginative play, numeracy, literacy, science and geography.**

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Another school provides guidance on the use of space and specific resources: for example, the guidance for using chalk states that children must chalk inside the coned area; there should be no more than 15 children chalking within this area at any given time; children should take care not to get chalk on their clothes and should use the cloth in the box to wipe their hands; children should always put the chalk away in the box at the end of playtime.

While two of the school's play policies reviewed do reflect the instrumental approach to play and learning, the other policies available for documentary analysis show a very clear alignment with the principles established in the OPAL guidance. For example, this school:

**... recognises that the impact of modern society on children's lives has significantly restricted their opportunity to play freely and wishes to help address this, alongside national and local government initiatives. It is therefore committed to encouraging the creation of high quality play opportunities within the school environment that are appropriate, accessible, stimulating and challenging for all of our children.**

**(School B)**

The tensions between play in an education context are illustrated by an infant school's play policy which seeks to balance the statements and intentions expressed in the South Gloucestershire Play Strategy while linking play with the five outcomes of Every Child Matters (ECM). This leads to a number of chapters that highlight the role of the school in supporting play to promote emotional health (through children expressing emotions, exploring identity, creating their own play experiences and thus enhancing their self-esteem); promoting physical

health (through provision of an environment where children can be physically active); promoting emotional and physical safety (by actively ensuring that children are safe from physical harm). It is this last point in particular that highlights some of the dilemmas in framing a play policy, where it may be accepted that playing will, at times, result in injury.



# OPAL in action: interviews and case studies

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Following the review of documentation, the next stage of the evaluation comprised a series of telephone interviews with headteachers or (in the case of one school) the member of staff with lead responsibility for implementing the OPAL Programme. Ten schools participated in these structured interviews (schools B, E, F, I, L, M, N, O, R and S), with open questions designed to elicit perceptions of the significant experiences and changes brought about by participating in the project. The key areas for discussion were established, informed by the five main elements of the OPAL audit process. The themes that emerged from these interviews informed the focus for observations, interviews and focus groups at the three case study schools (schools I, O and S) and these findings are combined in this chapter.

In line with the aims of this evaluation, one of the key areas for review considered the changes that had occurred as a result of participating in OPAL. At the conclusion of telephone interviews, participating schools were asked to rate their experiences of OPAL with a crude score that ranged from 0 (wish we hadn't done it) to 10 (the best move we ever made). Schools that responded to this, and scores, with additional comments where appropriate, are given in the table overleaf.

This would clearly suggest there has been great value in participating in the scheme, even in schools that have found some aspects of the Programme difficult to implement for a number of reasons.

The adult inputs and actions associated with OPAL establish the 'feel' of the play space through a range of interventions. These include the development of policies that acknowledge the nature and benefits of play, the changing attitudes of staff who provide immediate support for play, working with parents to allay their fears and concerns over children's play and risk, or enhancing the physical conditions for the play environment. Alongside this, attention should be paid to the ways in which children perceive the space as playful (recognising that this 'feel' is constantly shifting according to what is happening both inside the school and out). Drawing on the work of Beunderman (2010) again and applying it to this context, the value and benefits from this process arise from the essential nature of play (as spontaneous, heterogeneous, self-determined, 'as if'

<i>Name of school</i>	<i>Score: 0 = wish we hadn't done it, 10 = best move we ever made</i>
'S' Primary	<b>10:</b> 'I have been in education for 15 years, and by a long way this is the most successful and rewarding project I have ever been involved with.'
'N' Infants	<b>10:</b> 'Having completed Gold we are still working towards Platinum but the ethos is embedded in practice rather than seeking an award.'
'R' Primary	<b>10:</b> 'Very definite about this score.'
'O' Primary	<b>10:</b> 'In terms of the overall process, 8 when compared to other initiatives carried out in the school.'
'I' Primary	<b>10</b>
'E' Infants	<b>9:</b> 'I have found the support great and it helps sell and develop the play ethos.'
'L' Primary	<b>9:</b> 'The culture shift has been brilliant and the new areas work really well.'
'F' Junior	<b>8</b>

Table 4: School satisfaction scores.

and unpredictable behaviour}); however, 'because they are experienced at the level of the individual they are difficult to articulate in terms of mass outcomes ... and are better thought of then as the capacity and potential [of play] to affect us rather than as measurable and fixed stocks of worth' (Beunderman, 2010, p.75). What is being done at this stage is not measuring the changes but seeking to capture the value of change by recognising that the moments of play during the school day have benefits for both children and for adults.

### **Motivation for participation**

Schools do not start this process with a blank slate: all schools have playgrounds and playtime. All the schools that have participated in the OPAL Programme to date have put themselves forward to be considered for it. This implies that they had both an interest in play and a desire to enhance the current 'state of play' within the school. Indeed, this became apparent in the interviews through expressed frustration with the existing nature of playtime. As the notes from this interview reveal:

**Playtimes were largely restricted to the hard area where boys dominated with football, girls were peripheral and teachers spent the first 30 minutes after lunchtime dealing with playground issues.**

**(Headteacher, School O)**

Similarly the headteacher at School N commented that when she took up the post in 2006 she felt that something 'was not quite right in the playground' but was not sure what to do. There were traditionally two separate playgrounds, one for Year 2, the other for Year 1 and the Reception class, but there was a feeling that all the children should be together. Grass space was only used in summer, the playground was crowded, the climbing frame not used and she wanted to open up the space for more possibilities.

These headteachers learned of the opportunity to participate in the OPAL Programme both through direct invitation and also through networks and

recommendations from other schools that had had contact with the SGC Play Advisor.

### **Leadership and planning: developing a play culture**

A key and consistent finding from the evaluation of the OPAL Programme is that it is much more than a refitting of the material contents of the school playground. Although the physical changes to the outside grounds are important, many of the transformative aspects of the Programme came about because of a change in attitude which led to a change in practice. This included opening up areas of the grounds previously not used for playing, creating conditions for children to play out in all weathers (teachers at one school described as innovative the introduction of wellies and being able to go on to the school field in winter), rethinking restrictions on some forms of playing such as tree climbing, and taking a different approach to intervention in children's play.

Such a radical culture shift in attitudes to children's playful use of the outdoor environment requires strong leadership. This is emphasised in the documentation (in the first section of the audit paperwork), and it emerged as a very strong theme both in the telephone interviews and in the case study schools. In the opening stages of the OPAL Programme the focus is on *developing* a play culture; after the initial injection of energy and resources, the issue then becomes one of *embedding* a play culture into the overall culture of the school (see Chapter 5 'Embedding the play culture: towards sustainability').

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What is evident from the evaluation is that the successful initial buy-in and subsequent cultural shift in the school stemmed from the relationship between the headteacher (leadership from within the school) and the SGC Play Advisor (leadership from outside the school, but still contained within the local authority). Successful development of OPAL requires both initial motivation from the school and the support of a knowledgeable and enthusiastic advisor with authority. This combination offers the possibility of contextualising actions to the local needs of schools in a continuous dialogical and collaborative process of challenge, support and negotiation. During discussions with all staff there were several unsolicited comments about the fundamental contribution that the SGC Play Advisor had made to supporting change. In particular he provided initial and sustained motivation, specialist expertise and advice, a vision, and an external authority on topics such as risk-taking and the intrinsic nature and value of play. Although the Programme has developed a comprehensive range of supporting documentation, this is only really brought to life through personal contact in the form of ongoing dialogue, visits and information sessions, training and networking for staff and parents.

**He has been the catalyst, if you had taken him out of the equation it wouldn't have happened.**

**(School S interview notes)**

**He is inspirational and has such a strong vision. He inspired the staff to have ideas and to make the changes. His input has been huge in getting it off the ground.**

**(School R interview notes)**

**We used to climb trees when we were kids and never thought anything of it, but you think what if they fall and break their legs and all this sort of stuff. But like I said, since I have been on the course with [the SGC Play Advisor] it feels different, so I want him to come in here and chat to us all.**

**(Interview with senior lunchtime supervisor, School O)**

The documentation for OPAL has a heavy leaning towards practical and design interventions, since these are more readily articulated on paper than are the complexities and unpredictability of human relations and behaviour. Although the principle of culture change is explicit in the documentation and is woven throughout, this is difficult to express in written form and requires the leadership and motivation of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable play advisor.

Alongside this external agent is the key role of the headteacher. McKendrick's (2005) analysis of changes in primary school playgrounds in Scotland found that 85 per cent of the school ground improvement projects were initiated by the headteacher, highlighting how pivotal this role is. This was echoed in the OPAL Programme's analysis, through documentary review and interview: those schools achieving a high award had a consistent and senior figure with responsibility for leading change. This process involved disseminating information, forming working groups to look at sustainability of the approach, embedding play into school improvement plans, including it as an agenda item in staff meetings and so on.

### **The nature of design interventions**

What is apparent from the evaluation is the emphasis placed on changes to the physical playground environment. In documentary terms the play audit and action plans indicate a range of changes made to the physical environment, drawing on the *Grounds development ideas* and *Play landscape design principles* supporting documents. However, the separation of physical from cultural changes is a false one and has been made in this report purely for ease of structuring the material; in practical everyday terms, the two go hand in hand, and each informs and affects the other.

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All schools had made design interventions to the outdoor environment, and these ranged from very small modifications (such as opening up unused areas, or encouraging outdoor play in all weathers, both examples of the interrelationship between culture change and the physical environment available for play) to large-scale landscaping projects (one school moved to new premises and used the OPAL Programme to design the whole outdoor area from scratch with a budget of £40,000). Many of these took place over an extended period and changes were both strategically planned and emergent. Funding for changes varied enormously between schools and came from a range of sources including school budgets, PTAs and other fundraising by parents, local sponsorship or donations of equipment and supermarket vouchers.

It should also be noted that several (not all) of the schools, being rural or in small towns, had extensive grounds. These grounds included grassed areas, trees, bushes and often also areas of what the adults referred to as wasteland but that were highly attractive to children as places to play since they afforded opportunities for colonisation, den building, hiding (refuge and prospect) and an abundance of natural materials such as stones, twigs, leaves, flowers and grass that can be manipulated in any number of ways (Ward, 1978, 1990; Moore, 1986; Cloke and Jones, 2005).

In addition, a common change in schools, explicitly encouraged through the OPAL audit tools, was the opening up of areas for playing in all weathers. Specifically, the audit tools refer to the availability of coats and boots to enable playing out in inclement weather, together with attention to surfacing, particularly of access routes. For some schools this was readily implemented, others were limited less by the desire for change and more by the physical constraints of the schools. For example, one school pointed out the lack of indoor space for storing wellington boots and the fact that having mature trees meant that in summer the grass beneath died, rendering the space a 'mud bath' in the rain. In addition,

they shared the playing field with the local cricket club who needed it to be kept in good condition, thus limiting access in wet weather.

Despite restrictions, all schools evaluated had made efforts to increase access to outdoor play in all weathers. This meant that different areas of the outdoor space offered different play experiences throughout the year. Deciduous wooded and bushy areas change dramatically and can be manipulated in different ways through the seasons; in the rain or snow children used different areas in different ways. The observations of children's play at the case study schools were all carried out in November and December 2010, when the weather was icy and sometimes snowy. What is significant here is that there was no attempt to restrict children's use of space (other than a few minor rules about not throwing snowballs at heads). Children were able to make slides, fall over, and use equipment and materials in fairly novel ways, for example, children jumping over benches to slide on the small slope that led down to the trim trail area, or using the same slope to slide under the bottom rope of the bridge structure element of the trim trail (School O). This contrasts with many schools' approaches to perceived adverse weather conditions and the restriction of children's use of outdoor space, and also reinforces the ways in which schools involved in OPAL have sought to create 'all-weather' playtimes (with varying degrees of success).

These are a few examples of physical changes made:

- School N considered the whole school grounds, rather than just the playground area. They created a 'forest' area and a wildlife garden, introduced scrap materials and later installed a landscaped feature with a slope, tunnel and arena in order to offer all-year-round play space. They also removed the 'farm gate' between Years 1 and 2 playgrounds so that children could roam across the space.
- School L installed a huge oversized sandpit in the field. They also created a 'wild' area where the grass is not mown (although paths are mown through the area) and plants/trees have been allowed to grow up. This has become a secretive area where the children build dens. A piece of waste ground at the front of the school, with trees, now called the 'forest area' was opened up and made accessible (simply by opening a door and giving permission).
- School E made very few physical changes to the outside grounds. One of the main changes was to bring unused sections of the grounds into use, particularly the 'no-man's-land' between the infant and junior schools and also the woods. Converting an old boiler house into a PlayPod (see page 41) so that scrap materials are used on a piece of land between the junior and infant schools had the effect of breaking an invisible boundary: this piece of land had not been used for 40 years other than for sports day.

### Stuff to play with

The physical design interventions discussed above were complemented by the provision of play materials. Although schools had provided some games equipment at playtimes, the OPAL Programme promoted the use of 'loose parts' (Nicholson, 1971), both through opening up access to a range of natural materials such as grass, bushes, twigs and so on, and also through provision of scrap materials. Through this, children had access to infinitely flexible environments and material that they could use in any number of ways throughout the seasons. As Moore (1986) notes, diversity across space and time is a key theme in children's relationships with their environments. Jones suggests that 'this variety should be seen in terms of differing micro-spaces, scales, surfaces, forms, materials, spectacles and opportunities' (2000, p.39), highlighting once again the interrelatedness of physical landscape design, materials and licence to play. Consistently, schools commented on the

transformation brought about by the introduction of access to polymorphic materials, illustrated here:

**Previously we had lots of sports equipment that could only be used in specific ways, and it always got broken or lost; now the scrap means that children can do endless things, more scope, and it doesn't matter about breakage as it can be replenished – there is always something new/different to play with.**

**(School R interview notes)**

In their study of the introduction of loose parts into primary school playgrounds, Bundy and others (2009) note how, for very little cost, children's levels and range of physical, imaginative and social play can be significantly enhanced.

### ***The importance of PlayPods***

Four schools from the interview group used the Bristol Scrapstore PlayPod™ service (referred to in this report as PlayPods), which comprises a regularly renewed supply of scrap materials, a storage container, training and mentoring through Play Ranger sessions. The Play Rangers were able to bring their understanding of play and experience of working with children in parks and open spaces. Schools felt that this has added considerable value to children's play experiences; for example, School S commented that the PlayPod had been a 'real success' and 'children seem to value this and look after the stuff' which was different from previous playground equipment such as bats and balls. In addition, several schools had introduced the use of scrap materials in other ways and some also made use of the training, even if they did not buy into the complete service.

All three case study schools had invested in PlayPods. (The original selection of schools included one school which did not have a PlayPod, but this school was not able to participate, and a third school with a PlayPod agreed to fill the space at short notice). These appear to have made a significant contribution to changing the nature of playtimes. In School I the headteacher felt that the PlayPod had transformed playtimes, from what had been a largely football-dominated use of space by boys to much more mixing, and told a story of two older girls (who did not normally engage in imaginative play or get on with each other) who draped themselves in gauzy material and acted as queens, commanding the boys to serve them.

The lunchtime supervisor also valued the contribution of PlayPods to playtime:

**Coming here from another school which didn't have PlayPod or playground like here, the children are a lot calmer. At the other school they were quite boisterous and always running around, you were always constantly busy there, telling them off and sorting out their problems. You don't get that here because they are too busy playing. They have got so much to do.**

**(Lunchtime supervisor, School S)**

This sentiment resonates with responses from lunchtime supervisors at the other two case study schools:

**With things like the PlayPod and the new play area they are just occupied all the time, they are constantly playing with different children, always doing new things.**

**(Lunchtime supervisor, School I)**

and

**I think they enjoy it, they use their imagination quite a lot. The netting, when they go on the field, they make hammocks and this sort of stuff, they**



**have tug of war with it. They use their imagination quite a lot – dressing up. The same piece of equipment is used in many different ways, depending who is playing with it.**

**(Lunchtime supervisor, School O)**

And finally, this extract from field observations show how for children, the scrap materials have a significant role during playtime, being used in any number of ways:

**As part of the coming together a group of children start to make a den, using the fencing of one of the plant containers; this is quite an elaborate shelter, and the children appear to have assembled the 'best' bits for this – large sheets of what looks like plywood, a large round disc which they use for the roof, barrels, sheets of material, some wooden discs, plastic boxes. Maybe this is a regular den-making spot? Children (mostly mid-range boys, with some smaller boys) discuss who can come into den, there is lots of negotiating about what bits go where, with some minor arguments which get sorted quite quickly.**

**(School I)**

However, alongside staff enthusiasm for the PlayPods and scrap materials generally, there was also caused some anxiety. What was evident from the observations at all of the case study schools was the popularity of using scrap in play fighting games. Particularly in School S, great use was made of things that could be wielded as swords and rifles, especially in the wood area and edges of a field. While many schools did have broad principles and rules for playtime that generally encouraged children to play nicely, there was no great moral dilemma regarding war or superhero play. As one lunchtime supervisor (School S) stated, 'I think it's fine. They're not actually fighting with each other, they're just pretending.' The main concern was that of safety, and this is addressed in 'Risk, safety and interventions' below.

What was evident from the observations is that stuff to play with that is flexible and relatively undirected in terms of adult intentions affords children both imaginative and physical freedoms. This is particularly so if the material is provided in conjunction with a degree of spatial variation and freedom, together with freedom from close control and supervision.

## **Playtimes**

This chapter reports on how staff (headteachers, teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors) articulated the changes to playtimes as a result of participating in the OPAL Programme, and also on observations of children's use of the outdoor space at various times of day, including before school, during the school day and after school. Although staff sometimes talked about play inside the school and the use of the outdoor space during lessons, the main focus of discussions and observations was on playtime outdoors.

One infant school headteacher stated that they had stopped calling playtime 'playtime' and now called it 'break', because play happened all the time, it ran through everything and was the key priority in the school development plan. Much of this was linked to the delivery of the EYFS, and included what was termed both 'free' and 'structured' play. The headteacher stated that the target was 'to ensure that quality play provision has an impact on learning and leads to a continuation of high standards' (School E interview notes). In interviews, teaching staff spoke enthusiastically about the creativity and competence of children as players, often marvelling at the ways in which children used the space, the landscaping, equipment and the scrap materials in any number of ways. This sense of wonder was often accompanied by a discourse on the value of this in educational terms. Given that education is the



core business of schools, it is unsurprising that playing acquires value for what it affords in terms of learning, particularly for social and emotional development:

**I think relationships are developing – social relationships are much better – I think that comes from playing – they get on better, they solve their own problems, they negotiate and I think that’s why we have better behaviour because they are taking more responsibility – they are working together.**  
**(Teacher focus group, School S)**

Creativity, cooperation, leadership, extending themes and learning from the classroom to the playground were all themes that emerged from focus groups and interviews – for example, School I recounted how children had built an Anderson shelter following classroom discussions on the Second World War.

Issues arising from the changes introduced through OPAL were sometimes discussed in circle time, assembly or school council. These included helping to put the scrap back into the container at the end of playtime, stealing from others’ dens, balancing leadership and domination. Again, these discussions were couched in terms of developing social skills and a sense of responsibility.

Placing such an instrumental value on play in line with the educational ethos of schools need not necessarily exclude play’s intrinsic value (Beunderman, 2010). Teachers saw value in both. At school O, a teacher reported that the most valued change for her was ‘watching the children have fun at lunchtime’; at the same time she placed an educational value on this as a way of selling the idea to teaching colleagues:

**... this is relevant and helpful to your children because there is still learning going on even though to you they are just playing – I think it is probably seen as alright that the infants play, but by the time you get to years 5 and 6 they are probably more geared towards targets and we have to get through all this that I am wondering if play becomes less of a valuable thing.**

**(Teacher focus group, School O)**

The relationship between these instrumental outcomes for play and children’s own enjoyment of playtime is discussed further in Chapter 6.

The interventions made to physical space, culture change and practice are intended to enhance children’s play experiences. It was clearly evident from the perspective of those interviewed that these interventions had been successful in influencing the changing nature of children’s play patterns and behaviours. This was borne out by observations that illustrated the diverse and creative ways in which children use all the available space for playing, although it should be reiterated that these observations can provide only partial snapshots because of the limitations of time, immersion and weather conditions, as well as the difficulty of seeing what takes place across large sites.

All schools commented on the considerable changes to children’s play patterns, as the following extracts illustrate:

**We have seen a big shift in play behaviours from the traditional playground. There is a greater variety of play behaviours, children who were peripheral now have many alternatives for play. Den making using the trees and bushes area is significant. There are more girls and boys playing together and more space so children are able to spread out. Certain trees are designated climbing trees and used under supervision.**

**(School O interview notes)**

**There are fewer moans about small injuries. Children are less cliquey. With more materials through the PlayPod and larger spaces to play, there is more variety in their play and in their play partners. Materials encourage more interaction between more children. They use the woods a lot, having access to them for play is new (they had only gone into the woods before as a supervised learning activity) with a great deal of den-making activity.**  
(School E)

**There is lots of den making, the play is much more creative, imaginative. We have started putting different things outside for them to play with, like old school tables. Having the change in physical resources and accessing different areas has also had an effect on how they play at other times. For example, in the snow they played much more co-operatively and creatively. The skills they learned in playing with loose parts were transferred to other situations.**

(School R)

**The sandpit and the forest area are the biggest differences. There is a lot more den building too, in the wild area. We are lucky because it is a rural school and there is lots of space, a big field bordered by hedges. Children use wood, scrap, etc for dens. We had a broken old plastic shed and we used that along with some wooden crates that are now all destroyed (perfectly normal, they can be replaced), fallen branches and so on. We provide old plates for role play, bits of fabric and so on. Children use what they can find.**

(School L)

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Six of the ten schools interviewed in the first stage of the evaluation commented on the significance of space and materials to support children's den making. This is consistent with the research into attractive play spaces and the need for children to claim space as their own (see, for example, Sobel, 2002; Powell, 2007).

Conversations with lunchtime supervisors at the case study schools showed that they, too, felt that the children played in more varied ways and there were fewer conflicts. They describe in some detail, and often with an intuitive respect for children's imaginary worlds, how the children use the space for playing.

Another key theme to emerge from observations and discussions with staff was the gap between adult expectations and predictions about design and use of the space, and the infinitely flexible and creative ways that children actually used equipment, space and materials in their play. Observations of children using the landscape and structures in School S suggest that children made great and diverse use of the space and features. Of particular significance were the slope (because of the snow and ice at the time of observations) and the space around the edges of the field, particularly the 'woods' and the ridge that runs parallel with the fence. From the outset, the headteacher was surprised by children's use of space, structures and materials:

**It was how safely they were using it – at the same time it was how inventive they were, doing things with it that we didn't even consider. We got some big cable drums and the children were actually able to wrap themselves around the middle and roll along, which was amazing. And then children were taking the tyres to the top of the slope and climbing in three or four tyres and rolling down. Some were getting a few bruises and so next time they would go down in two tyres rather than four so they could have more control but it was (1) how willing children were to experiment in all sorts of ways and use the environment in ways that we hadn't thought possible and (2) it was how well they got on together and I**

**think almost immediately we ended up with a situation where lunchtime controllers almost became redundant because instead of having lots of children gathering around them bored, moaning all the time, nobody was anywhere near them because they were off playing.**

**(Headteacher, School S)**

School I's headteacher spoke about how the adults' expectations were soon overturned as children used the space in many different ways, for example, the stone circle became stepping stones, or children would see how many of them could fit onto one stone. This was probably the most valuable aspect of the design: that it was flexible and challenging and children could use it in a variety of ways.

Two of the case study schools had 'trim trails' as part of previous investment in playground design. These were felt by the headteachers to be somewhat limited because 'very quickly on they can do it and the challenge has gone – it's like "I can do that bit, I can do that bit" and so it doesn't quite lend itself to develop into other ways' (Headteacher, School I). Yet, despite these reservations, the trim trails did actually feature quite considerably in children's play. In School I, it was a significant place for meeting up as well as for rough-and-tumble play. The slight slope on the approach to the trim trail, which had an artificial surface, was also attractive for running and sliding down. At School O, children used the trim trail in a variety of ways including using the monkey bars to hold onto while sliding on the ice underneath; tying netting from the PlayPod to the frame and then swinging on it; and as a jumping course for horse-riding, complete with accompanying neighing sounds.

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The observations also showed children's use of everyday and apparently mundane features: the three plant containers were very significant spaces for play in School I, being used for den making, sitting behind with friends, chasing around and as hiding places. It was interesting to see the ways in which children were attracted to a 'wet paint' sign and tape stretched between two walls, erected to keep children away from a set of steps that had their edges painted. A group of children spent time ducking under the tape and jumping the steps to avoid the paint (which, by this time, was dry) and when reaching the edge of the area telling other children to stay away from the paint.

In School O there were a number of significant everyday spaces: the small slope that led from the path to the field for scrambling up and sliding down, the green doors on the outside of the building as a base for chase and capture games, the space behind the bush for a hiding place. In School S, the wellie boxes that are positioned under the canopy at the entry to the classrooms were an important site for sitting and chatting, children's make-believe games, den making and so on.

Alongside the greater variety in play behaviours, staff also reported fewer incidents that needed adult attention. Partly this was felt to be because children were too absorbed in their play and that having more and varied space and materials for play meant fewer disagreements over scarce resources. In addition, investment in training for lunchtime supervisors meant that they took on greater responsibility in responding to situations that did arise, and this was echoed by headteachers:

**When I first started here, I never got out at playtime or lunchtimes because children were queuing up around the door ... I just didn't get out. I rarely have children sent to me now and I think the Lunchtime Organisers know how to deal with things, and don't have to deal with as much. So that's been really good, that's the thing that I really noticed and hopefully there is a knock on with teachers not having to deal with so much that**

**comes up – some things were happening at lunchtime and we would spend the next hour doing circle time trying to get to the root of it.**

**(Headteacher, School O)**

Accompanying this was a similar reduction in the children reporting minor injuries. Several interviewees commented that before the changes, children would frequently report small incidents and accidents to staff, but after the changes they seemed to be more interested in carrying on playing than reporting these.

### **Risk, safety and interventions**

The nature of playtime is heavily influenced both by the physical design of the space and also by the culture of expectations of behaviour. Design interventions and culture change are implemented by adults with the intention of promoting particular forms of playing. Sometimes, when these expectations are confounded, adults are surprised and heartened by children's creativity and inventiveness, as described in the previous section. However, some forms of playing give rise to great anxiety for the adults responsible. Two chief sources of such anxiety are the fear for children's safety and the desire to promote cooperation and 'playing nicely'. The OPAL Programme challenges the prevailing attitude towards risk, suggesting risk-taking brings benefits. The documentation offers outline guidance that was developed in conjunction with the SGC Health and Safety Manager, and signposts schools to government-endorsed guidance on managing risk in play provision (Ball and others, 2008). The topic is also addressed in training for staff, including lunchtime supervisors, and in the mentoring from Play Rangers as an element of the PlayPod service. The importance of risk-taking in children's play is also recognised in the Conservatives' (2008) *Childhood review*.

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One of the significant themes to emerge from the interviews with staff at all levels was the change in attitude to risk within the school, a shift away from risk-aversion towards accepting that the benefits of play must inevitably entail a degree of risk-taking.

**There has been a huge shift in terms of approaches to health and safety, we were much more safety conscious and cautious before. As a result of the work with SGC Play Advisor, the decision was made that restrictions would be loosened. This was a big ethos change, after decades of teaching where the focus was safety. We found it hard but have got used to it now. Previously, children were not allowed to climb trees, now they are.**

**(School L)**

**As developments of the grounds were emerging, the headteacher, at the same time, began work on developing a play policy as a pre-emptive move that recognised as the playground changed, so too would play behaviours and needed to capture this and 'sell' key messages about risk.**

**(School S)**

Headteachers used a variety of methods to 'sell' the nature of playtimes to others, in particular parents. For example, School I had a period when the Bristol Playbus ran regular sessions on site, including use of a firepit which helped prepare parents for the redesign of the playground and the introduction of the PlayPod. Another used the authority of the SGC Play Advisor and his relationship with the SGC Health and Safety Officer, stating:

**That counts for an awful lot, both in terms of selling to staff and parents and also in terms of paper trail for peace of mind around litigation. This is one of the biggest shifts in culture/attitude.**

**(School E)**

School S describes their considered strategy:

**The first thing when we started was to put together a play policy which was very much talking about how it is now acceptable for children to take risks on the playground, to get bruises, cuts, hurt themselves, fall over and what we are not going to do as a school anymore is to remove any obstacle on the playground that could possibly cause injury because children need to be able to explore and play. And so that was taken through the governors and we put it in newsletter publishing what we do why we do – the parents actually began to take this on board before anything happened and then parents were involved in the design process and saw the finalised design, and then step by step they saw everything being built and so they had the excitement with their children seeing these structures going up and then over a four month period and then I think you know in hindsight, and it wasn't planned deliberately the first day the parents had the opportunity to attend the 'play day' – they could see the enjoyment the children were actually getting from it.**  
(School S)

However, such a fundamental shift is not easy nor is it uniformly accepted by all staff. This headteacher recounts her ambivalence and anxiety:

**I remember going out and the PlayPod was working and the children had tied this netting to the climbing thing (trim trail) and the children are swinging back and forth and you think 'O my giddy aunt', and your heart does go 'aggh!!' But actually they might fall off and break an arm, but hopefully they won't – but there is risk – but it's saying that's ok, this is reasonable risk – we have all had that moment.**

(Headteacher, School O)

Another teacher recalled a specific issue around children swinging on a rope feature on one of the play structures. Children wanted to swing backwards and forwards on the rope and on one occasion someone fell off and approached the teacher to 'moan':

**I said, 'You were swinging on the rope as well, you then can't come and say that you have been hurt by something that you were doing and other people hurt you. It was your choice to swing on the rope.' I ... It came up in class and it was brought up in assembly. They don't do it anymore – I think we did then start to limit the amount of children swinging because it did get to a point – because they loved it. They all swung, the moment was over and now there are less of them doing it. I think we just kind of said that that was your choice, and if it is your choice to do something, if you're going to get hurt you need to accept the fact that you might fall off.**

(School I)

For the lunchtime supervisors – the ones who have to respond to the moment-by-moment changes in children's play – judgements about risk and intervention can be even harder. All those at the case study schools had undertaken the six-week training course, where key messages were described as giving the children more freedom and not wrapping them up in cotton wool, stepping back more, and letting them get out and play and use their imagination:

**It took a bit getting use to. When I was told about PlayPod, we thought it would be skipping ropes and stuff, but when we were told it was going to be rope and netting and other stuff we thought 'whoa!' We were horrified, we really were – how bad is this thing going to be? – but I think it is absolutely fantastic.**

(School S)

While appreciating the principle of stepping back and trusting the children to ask for help if they needed it, the lunchtime supervisors were still aware of their supervisory responsibilities. Their own personal anxieties often led to interventions:

**We had some elasticated stuff that they put all over the playground. They had it attached to the bin lid and used it like a catapult thing, pulling it back and letting it go, but it wasn't really strong enough. As they were using the elastic, we were taking it off them and putting it in the bin.**

**(School S)**

During discussions, some lunchtime supervisors expressed ambivalence in terms of their responsibilities and day-to-day practice, even as they recognised the key principles of the training:

**Accountability weighs most on my mind. It's alright to say they can run across tables, but if somebody falls off that table and cracks their head open, we are responsible because we were in charge of them when they did it.**

**(School S)**

One lunchtime supervisor (School O) reported that her conversations with the SGC Play Advisor and the training she had undertaken had helped move her from a position where she 'saw the danger signs in everything' to one where she felt more relaxed.

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The sense of supervisory responsibility also extends into wider approaches to intervening in children's play. Headteachers recognised this, stating that although there had been changes from traditional practices, there is still some way to go, and acknowledged that the process takes time. There were examples of the mismatch between the headteachers' espoused desire for children to find time and space to play in their own way and the everyday interactions and interventions made by the lunchtime supervisors. At School S, for example, one of the design interventions was to create shaped willow 'tents' and frames for den making. However, children's ability to create secret spaces was compromised by the ways in which lunchtime supervisors intervened:

**I have always gone in and peeked in and said, 'Who is in here?' and then just say, 'Just to check,' so I know that they are getting on fine and they are about the same age. When you have the little ones and the bigger ones you are always a bit wary that they are influencing the little ones, so then we say 'right, can these be pulled away?'**

**(Lunchtime supervisor, School S)**

This approach was repeated across the case study schools in stories told by lunchtime supervisors of how they intervene in play 'to make things better', in ways that might not correlate with their training ('step back and try and let children sort things out for themselves'). This may be more in tune with the overarching school ethos. Thus, sometimes a confusing picture is presented.

### ***The scrap-on-scrap rule***

One particular illustration of the ambiguity in the espousal and practice of the principle of low intervention and free-ranging play can be seen in the ways in which schools in the case studies implement the 'scrap-on-scrap' rule (instigated through the PlayPod training as a way of minimising accidents and issues around children's play fighting with scrap materials).



The 'scrap-on-scrap' rule has value both externally (as a way of lessening anxieties from 'external' adults such as parents or visitors) and internally (as a way of reducing some of the initial fears of lunchtime supervisors and teachers when confronted with children's early use of the PlayPod materials). Children are made aware of this rule with the introduction of the PlayPod, and there were observed examples of children following this in their play, suggesting that the rule may have perceived value for supporting play within safe and beneficial limits. Yet, in all case study schools and on fairly regular occasions, this rule was ignored, particularly, but not exclusively, by boys who were highly visible in their sword play fighting, with either no intervention made by the lunchtime supervisors or intervention that was limited to a passing comment: 'Remember, scrap-on-scrap,' after which the children generally moved away from the area to continue their game elsewhere. These observation notes illustrate this point:

**Children are continuing their war games on the far side of the hill, most carrying cardboard tubes, and they are hitting each other with tubes. This draws the attention of the LO who, when children are waving tubes around shouts over 'whoa, be careful'. She walks away and children carry on.**

**(School S)**

**Around the side of the building is a covered area that is not easily seen. This is where boys assemble with foam swords and they are whacking each other (not scrap on scrap). The LO walks around to take child inside and all the lads run away from this area back into the playground – chasing each other – and some girls also involved in this game. LO walks over to the group and reminds them about 'scrap on scrap'. The children run away and go to another part of the playground.**

**(School O)**

**Some of younger children have moved on to jungle gym area, climbing and swinging on the equipment. Kids with swords also move into this area. Three children are fighting against the one who 'stole' the sword. The children do hit each other with swords occasionally and at one point a child runs off to the step area (out of bounds) to get to safety. This game continues for most of the observation. In spite of the earlier conversation with the lunchtime supervisors, there has been no effort by LO to intervene in this game, and it is quite visible. There are times when they are hitting each other rather than 'scrap on scrap'. One child appears to be quite aggressive, and lashing out with a sword, other children a little cautious in getting too close but still play. After this they meet and agree to go 2 against 2 rather than 3 against 1 and the game continues, moving on to the raised area.**

**(School I)**

The ambiguity around scrap-on-scrap was expressed by one headteacher:

**We've had lots of discussion about 'scrap-on-scrap' and that was one which we ran with for a long period of time. We got then in a situation where we stopped it for a little time and then it came back in and I think to be fair to staff it is one that they have very mixed views about. Some staff are very – they shouldn't be fighting at all – my line is it doesn't matter what you provide a boy with, (this is very stereotypical, and maybe I shouldn't do this, girls do it as well), if you have a gun, you have to go around shooting – if you haven't got a gun, you find a stick. But you just can't – it doesn't matter what you ban, children will find another name for that game. They will always, they are very inventive – and so my view is that as long as children are playing within the realms of – as long as they**



**are nice to each other and not causing injury – then I think it is important that children have that opportunity to experiment and express themselves. But it is a drip by drip approach, you don't get everybody who buys in to that.**

**(School S)**

Responses from the teacher focus group at this school also indicated a degree of uncertainty about the nature of scrap-on-scrap which was bound up with the complexities of how this form of play was valued, the question of children who had behavioural targets and needed clear rules and boundaries, and the practice of tagging pieces of scrap to show which could be used for play fighting.

What this might speculatively suggest, to an outside observer, is that lunchtime supervisors and children had perhaps managed to find a way of getting on together. A universal rule of 'scrap-on-scrap' has value but can be interpreted by lunchtime supervisors according to the children and the idiosyncratic context for each play episode. Perhaps this is in line with the dual function of their role, namely providing care while at the same time recognising that a central part of the changing nature of their approach to playtime is to stand back and intervene less in children's play. There were observations of lunchtime supervisors' interventions with children at a very casual level to remind them of the rule, which perhaps lessens the lunchtime supervisors' concerns and re-establishes their sense of care and responsibility. Children may take some notice (perhaps more about appeasing the adult) and then find ways of continuing with their play.

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This 'ambiguous' approach did start to emerge in the focus group discussions with lunchtime supervisors. One senior lunchtime supervisor commented:

**I think the little ones – I think with the softer things it's not so bad – they are doing that but they shouldn't be doing that – the older ones – you know I say to them 'you have to do scrap-on-scrap, you know the rules' and that's what I say. They don't really have cardboard tubes on the playground at the moment. I think the softer ones, they are not going to really hurt anyone if they do hit anyone, but it is not supposed to be as far as I know.**

**(School O)**

The everyday practices, from both adults and children, appear to have established a 'culture' that has emerged over time that suits the needs of both groups; it might be speculated that this extends into the overall feel of the space and the general ways in which adults and children get on together in this space; children do seem to be able to manipulate the environment, materials, rules and expectations for their playful expressions.

### **Beyond playtimes**

As well as perceived changes to children's play behaviours at playtime, schools also commented on changes to children's general behaviour within the school. While it is impossible to draw any direct cause-effect relationship between children's experiences of playtime, general behaviour and academic achievement, headteachers and teaching staff from a number of schools commented that the changes in approaches to supporting children's play implemented through the OPAL Programme had resulted in significant changes to children's enjoyment of school, and that the 'reporting of children's arguments and incidents has dramatically decreased and behaviour is so much better' (School R interview notes). Again, these findings are consistent with the evidence from similar research (Jarrett and others, 1998; Pellegrini and Bohn, 2005; Barros and others, 2009; Pellegrini, 2009).

For example, one headteacher commented that while not being able to make general claims, she was aware that individual children who had found playtimes stressful now seemed much happier; in particular boys who didn't like playing, or were no good at, football could find time and space for role-playing and imaginative play (School O interview notes). Another headteacher told a story of a boy who had been displaying some behavioural difficulties, and with whom they were anticipating problems when he reached Year 6:

**Now we've introduced the more free range play with loose parts, he's absolutely fantastic. He's a fantastic team builder, children co-operate with him, he has a fantastic imagination, he can make dens, he loves it, loves it. And he draws in younger children to play with him. So it's made a real difference to him, the idea of this creative play.**

**(School R interview notes)**

In discussions with teaching staff from the case study schools, there was general agreement that children come into classroom after lunchtime 'tired' and 'relaxed', having had a good experience playing and are ready for work:

**I actually can come in and sit down and again they have that quiet time, we can have a story – I think because that have had an active lunchtime they've been interested in what they have been doing at lunchtime, they haven't come in either bored or just cold or not done anything or been wandering in and out. They are actually ready then to learn I think more in the afternoon.**

**(School I)**

**I think relationships are developing, social relationships are much better. I think that comes from playing. They get on better, they solve their own problems, they negotiate and I think that's why we have better behaviour because they are taking more responsibility, they are working together.**

**(School S)**

At School S, the headteacher had been looking at children's academic progress and, while there is no certain cause-and-effect relationship, he felt that children's reading levels, and to a lesser degree writing and numeracy in average/weaker children, had made progress beyond what might be expected over the previous 12 months.

The changes and associated benefits made to school playtimes are not particularly addressed by Ofsted inspections, although School S is a notable exception in that it attracted somewhat contradictory comments about the playground. On the one hand the Ofsted report praised the school's attractive learning and play environment and children's enjoyment of playtimes, while also commenting that a small minority of children 'exhibit over-boisterous behaviour' and called for closer supervision to prevent this. This example perfectly illustrates the tensions previously discussed around understandings and perception of play in school; while the school, through its engagement with the OPAL Programme, has adopted a stance that recognises and values children's play expressions, external bodies may have a different perception of these types of behaviour.

Finally, the changes to the design of outdoor spaces at schools offer a considerable community resource, something that is also acknowledged in the OPAL audit tool. For some schools, participating in the OPAL Programme has both increased parental involvement in schools through their involvement in design, contributing materials and so on, but has also offered a space for other organisations, for example, grounds being used for community-run holiday playschemes and after-school clubs. This was not addressed in any depth in this evaluation.

## Embedding the play culture: towards sustainability

The OPAL Programme offers considerable support over a period of time, which is reduced after the final audit and award. Schools can still contact the SGC Play Advisor and can attend the network of OPAL schools that he coordinates, but as with all such interventions, the real test is whether the culture change can be sustained beyond the exciting period of major changes to the design of the outdoor space. What emerged from discussions with schools is a sense that they have to be committed to making change over a period of time and not simply look for 'quick fix':

**The HT constantly reinforced the importance of treating it as an organic process and that change is slow – and needs to be to bring everyone along and embed into school routines. OPAL built on what was already in place – ie a desire to improve the school playtime, but offered clear guidance and support on ways to achieve this.**

(School N interview notes)

**A strong piece of advice is not to try and change culture suddenly. They made a series of small steps so practice changes were not a sudden shock. Takes time. She advises strongly this is the best approach. Take everyone with you.**

(School E interview notes)

This involved working with parents, teachers and lunchtime supervisors, who play a crucial role. It is apparent that most schools had sought to engage with parents at all stages of development, in particular around key areas of changing the school approach to risk and developing 'all weather play'. As with all changes, there are likely to be tensions: two schools commented that the approach to all-weather play may still generate some concerns with parents. But overall, all schools stated that parents were supportive of the changes and there had not been any serious concerns expressed about these policy shifts.

Parents had been encouraged to bring scrap materials to school for playground use, and many of the physical improvements had been supported by funds raised by PTA groups. A number of schools have organised 'family days', often coinciding with the official opening of a new playground feature, and again headteachers commented on the value of this for reassuring parents of the nature and value of the changes. One example was given in an interview where, instead of the traditional 'open day', School E organised a family fun day when parents came and played with their children. Children took their parents into the 'woods' and the parents were really impressed and affected by this. Feedback from parents has been very positive and as the headteacher commented, it marks the difference between understanding play intellectually and experiencing it.

Schools had provided training for lunchtime supervisors and again this appears to be a significant aspect of implementing a cultural shift in approach. A number of schools commented on the value of training in enabling lunchtime supervisors to move away from 'traditional role' of managing children's behaviour to a more distant role designed to support play. The schools that had subscribed to the PlayPod service also benefited from the Play Ranger mentoring which also played a key role in the cultural and attitudinal shift for lunchtime supervisors.

The headteachers at the case study schools revealed a very strong commitment to the ideas presented in the OPAL Programme, which acted as a significant catalyst to enable each school to develop its own tailored response and action plan to improve playtime. One headteacher describes the importance of developing a whole-school approach:

**I think in any school the hardest challenge for a headteacher is, whatever you do, is to get the whole school community to do it with you and I think that is very apparent with the parents and the staff and the children. And I think in this situation the children have been the easy ones because they want to do it ... The staff, staff do obviously come to school with different values, experiences, approaches and I think the key really is in order for any strategy to work you have to take staff with you. The staff have got to see the value of what you are doing – and it is a step by step chip by chip approach – we have all had training and staff have moved a long way. I think what is very apparent here at the moment is that you have a very large percentage of staff that buy into it wholeheartedly and we still have some members of staff, although they have moved a long way, still haven't bought into it completely in terms of the giving children the freedom that they have and some still find that quite difficult and still find it important that they make the, erm, from my point of view they jump in possibly too soon.**

**(School S)**

Alongside this, there is the headteachers' desire that children should be able to deal with the everyday issues that arise in play. Two headteachers used the term 'resilience' in this context, with one providing an anecdote to illustrate this approach when children climbed to the top of the 'igloo' timber frames:

**All the boys sat on top and Reception children have climbed to the top of that and sat there and then said to me, 'I can't get down.' I went, 'Oh never mind,' and walked off and all of a sudden they are coming and running behind me – you leave them to do it, they will come.**

**(School I)**

The final comment goes to the children: when teachers were asked if they thought the changes were sustainable, the reply was:

**A lot of it is owned by the children – and they will carry on using it in the ways they want.**

**(Teacher focus group, School S)**

## Chapter 6

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# Discussion

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It is evident from both phases of the evaluation that there have been significant improvements to the design of and approach to supporting children's play, and this has resulted in considerable changes in children's play patterns and behaviours within school.

Key findings suggest that a significant majority of schools have recognised and acted upon the importance of embedding understandings of play into all aspects of the school (policies, procedures, working practices and relationships with parents and the wider community) and approached this as an emergent and continuous process rather than a one-off, quick-fix solution. In the schools where changes have covered the whole spectrum of OPAL audit themes, there are complex interrelated and mutually influential relationships. Thus, for example, the initial drive for change, largely initiated by headteachers working in collaboration with the SGC Play Advisor, establishes a clear direction for the school, which is expressed through redesigning policy and developing implementation strategies. This provokes design interventions and attitudinal changes which lead to children being able to play in different and varied ways, breaking up some 'traditional' patterns of playtime and associated perceived behavioural issues. This in turn leads to teachers and lunchtime supervisors to feeling more relaxed and facing fewer demands from children to deal with petty issues, which also means that members of staff have more opportunity to observe play and become more familiar with children's play expressions and their relationship with each other and the space. Accompanying this, as children's enjoyment of playtime increases, there is a reported reduction in the recording of minor incidents and injuries as children are too engaged in playing to be bothered with this, establishing a culture of 'these things happen' and are part of childhood rather than fuelling staff and parental anxieties about risk and safety. Children's increased ability to enjoy playtime may also trickle down into their approach to learning and their overall enjoyment of school, with – again – mutually reinforcing changes occurring.

Of course, this is not a predictable and causal relationship and things do not always go according to plan. However, the foundations established through the OPAL support documentation, the process of audit and action plans, and the ongoing relationship between schools and the SGC Play Advisor establish clear guiding principles that allow for creative approaches to resolving the problems and issues that are encountered. As such, each school will follow a unique trajectory in implementing changes. The key success of the Programme appears to be the ability to support idiosyncratic and customised approaches that are sensitive to local contexts, and are often small-scale and inexpensive.

Each of the headteachers from the case study schools referred to participation in OPAL as a 'journey' and acknowledged the openness of the process. However, this was always embedded within the overall context of the school ethos, and there were numerous examples of the ways in which instrumental understandings of the value of play bridged classroom and playground expectations. Designs interventions were intended, in a cause-and-effect manner, to produce certain forms of desirable behaviours (problem-solving, social space, sharing, etc). While play 'choice' and 'freedom' are consistent themes in discussions, children's ability to use time/space and materials for their own desires and purposes is limited by a series of practices, materials and codes that suggest only certain forms of play are desirable, as exemplified by the 'scrap-on-scrap' rule. The language used by the teaching staff was often phrased in terms of instrumental outcomes for particular forms of playing (links to curriculum, behaviour, PSE and so on), or the impact of the changes on children's behaviour both at playtimes and in the classroom (see 'Playtimes', 'Risk, safety and intervention' and 'Beyond playtimes' in Chapter 5). Lunchtime supervisors talked more in terms of responsibility for children's safety and what they felt comfortable with. Observations showed children's agency and enjoyment in having time and space for playing, acknowledging play's intrinsic value. Although the Programme is named OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning), the documentation draws from the theories and ethos used in playwork, which sees play's intrinsic value as paramount, while also recognising that other more instrumental values may stem from this. However, the balance is a delicate one: too much structure and direction towards specified ends reduces the intrinsic motivation, spontaneity and unpredictability of playing, that sense of being in control or being out-of-control (Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007), thereby also reducing the benefits that accrue from these characteristics of playing (Lester and Russell, 2008).

There is inevitably a tension between the principle of children's self-organised, free-range play promoted within the OPAL documentation and the desire of teaching staff for educational and developmental outcomes from play. The design of the space and the culture around the kinds of behaviours that were promoted or constrained were controlled by adults. This is not to deny that children were involved in the design of the outdoor space when changes were planned, nor to deny children's own agency to find ways to play. It is a recognition that schools are institutions where adults have the responsibility to educate children, and this is informed by prevailing paradigms and rhetorics about childhood, learning and education. Children will sometimes comply with the intentions of adults and sometimes seek to disrupt this order, and the relationship between adult expectations and hopes and children's own playing combine to develop a culture of behaviour at playtimes. The narratives from teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors, together with the observations, highlighted children's sophisticated strategies to find space away from adult gaze and at times to resist the 'rules' imposed upon their play. What OPAL does is offer an alternative narrative that goes some way towards creating the conditions that support children's play – the provision of attractive play spaces and materials together with a culture that, to an extent, can tolerate risk-taking and lower levels of intervention.

What is not particularly evident from the documentation is how the changes are 'captured' through the OPAL audit process. Information is minimal and the final audit offers a few headline actions that have been implemented without the fine detail that indicates what the effect of these changes may have made to children's play experiences. The interviews with school leads did start to capture some of the complexity and tensions associated with change and this material may have value in presenting a 'story' for each school that records the effects

that the changes produced, thereby providing a cultural history. These stories were further embellished through spending time at the case study schools, observing children's use of the outdoor space for play and talking to staff.

These stories can become an important artefact within the school and support the sustainability of the project. Dahlberg and others (2007) note the importance of documentation in evaluating and the making of meaning, pointing out the contribution that the process and the content of documentation can make to sharing the experiences of those involved. 'Documentation as content' refers to material that records children's use of the grounds, the ways in which children can 'be and act' at playtimes, and the ways in which supervisors intervene in children's play, both through the design and planning of space/materials and the nature of relationships with children. Content material can be developed in many forms and media, but in essence captures the everyday practices of children and adults in a particular location. It also provides the basis for the process of critical reflection, to enable all involved to make sense of their experiences and find meaning against the key OPAL principles. Such a process allows for building a culture and repertoire of 'what works' while, at the same, time enabling tensions, particularly around understandings of play and space, to be made explicit. This process contributes to the overall sustainability of the approach through embedding play into the very culture of school practices and relationships, and providing stories that can bring the concepts alive for those outside the school as well as for new staff.

Discussions with staff at the case study schools suggested that although lunchtime supervisors had attended training and some had also benefited from mentoring from Play Rangers, there was little opportunity for them beyond this to share their knowledge of the effectiveness or otherwise of the outdoor space in supporting children's play with teaching staff. Discussions between lunchtime supervisors and teaching staff (either class teachers or the headteachers) tended to focus on problems (incidents and accidents). This meant that everyday stories of children's play were not shared among the staff, something that may be useful in developing an understanding of how the space works, both in terms of material content and culture.



## Chapter 7

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# Conclusions

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Given the importance of play in children's lives and current concerns about children's opportunity to access the time and space to initiate their own play, participation in the OPAL Programme has the potential to reap considerable benefits for children, parents, schools and the wider community. The design of OPAL establishes some clear guiding principles and strategies for initiating changes to playtime. One of its significant features revolves around the importance of a 'whole-school' approach which drives forward a cultural shift in thinking and attitudes about play that acknowledge the value of play as a right and for its own sake rather than for adult-designed, instrumental purposes. It is from this perspective that the benefits of play are more fully realised, and there are accompanying benefits in an educational and wider context as children learn to get on together, enjoy school, undertake forms of exercise that involve moderate stress and moving in non-regular patterns, find time and space to recover attention and so on.

The OPAL Programme was established during a period when there was unprecedented investment in play from central government through the Play Strategy (DCSF, 2008) as well as within early years education, together with a focus on inter-agency working towards shared outcomes for children. Since the evaluation of OPAL began, there has been a change of government, bringing with it fundamental changes to state education alongside significant reductions in public spending. This suggests that there is a risk that the important issue of play within schools, and play in society more generally, will slip down the agenda of government, education authorities and individual schools. We sincerely hope that the evidence presented here, both from the literature and from the OPAL Programme, presents a strong case for the importance of OPAL as a model for creating conditions that support children's play within schools.

Perhaps the final word should be left to the headteacher of School S, who comments: 'I have been in education for 15 years, and by a long way this is the most successful and rewarding project I have ever been involved with.'

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