

Australian Primary School Playgrounds: Monuments to Misunderstanding?

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Abstract

In the eyes of the international community, the image of Australia is perhaps one of the “Lucky Country” where Aussie kids are afforded ample play opportunities in its wide, open spaces and natural settings.

Australian school playgrounds have historically played a central role in the makeup of community spaces that children utilise for their own play. However, like many OECD countries, Australia is currently experiencing a decline in free outdoor play. For some children, the school playground may be their only opportunity in the day to access free, self-directed play. This is occurring in a climate where an increasing number of Australian primary schools are finding playtime “breaks” problematic, requiring support from staff who are not necessarily trained in play and as a result, are now introducing reductive measures to deal with playground problems.

Since 2010, Australian not-for-profit Play for Life¹ has been working with primary schools on the journey of understanding the broad and complex nature of children’s play and assisting them in developing a culture of playfulness at school. Through a series of play development interventions, teachers have been encouraged and supported to adopt a playwork approach to supporting the conditions for children’s play on their playgrounds.

The three year pilot of its flagship program, *Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools* delivered impressive outcomes, including an increase in children’s motivation and engagement, increase in pleasure and enjoyment for both teachers and students and a reduction of yard incidents and accidents. However, one of the most significant changes was the practice of teachers in altering their approach to playground supervision and in turn, their classroom practice.

This paper explores the partnership between Play for Life and Australian teachers on their journey of creating more playful schools and richer play environments for kids.

Keywords

Play in Education, Playwork in schools

¹ *Play for Life is a not-for-profit organisation working to improve play opportunities for children wherever they may be, but with a particular focus on play while they are at school. Its work is founded on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right to play, with the objective of ensuring that all Australian children have a rich and healthy play experience at school that enhances their educational outcomes and prepares them for life.*

Introduction

The state of play in Australian primary schools

As in many OECD countries, and also in Australia, impacts on our modern society have significantly restricted children's ability to access free, independent play, most significantly outdoor play adventures. Play experiences that many of us took for granted when we were young are now being radically diminished or at risk of disappearing entirely for children today. One key, contributing factor is that we are now living in an increasingly risk-averse, litigiously fearful Australia. This, coupled with a lack of understanding of the role of play and 'play literacies', also means essential developmental life skills such as resilience, adaptability and creative thinking, all gained through play, are also being affected. As a result, we are seeing the emergence of a 21st century phenomenon of 'play deficit disorder' on Australian primary school playgrounds, where children are presenting at school with inadequate play skills to navigate the school playground successfully for themselves. More alarmingly, health statistics such as increases in childhood obesity, mental health issues, bullying and social disconnection are being directly attributed to the decline in free play and independent mobility for children and young people.¹

Other research also suggests that today's children are suffering from over-scheduled and heavily supervised lives with an increasing amount of 'screen time' dominating their leisure time². Typically, their day is taken up with a variety of things such as school, homework, clubs and formal activities. When these commitments are added to environmental restrictions due to increased traffic, the busy lives of parents and heightened anxieties over children's safety, it all contributes to children becoming deprived of free and accessible opportunities for self-directed play.

This can result in children manifesting 'play deficit' behaviours, which can be clearly observed during their time on the playground in a number of ways. It is also evident when examining school data such as yard incident reports². Errant behavior on the playground can be caused by a number of factors, but there can be a direct correlation between the reported behavior and inadequate play development or play skills in children, compounded by the school's low level of 'play literacies' and understanding of play.

Through playground experiences, both positive and negative, important social skills, character and resilience are formed which will see children through their adolescent years and on into adulthood. With so much changing in childhood today, the school playground is one place where children are guaranteed (or should be guaranteed) a certain amount of time daily to play freely outdoors with their friends. As a result, Australian schools are increasingly beginning to understand the key role and importance of the non-directed time at school for kids and teachers alike. This often overlooked part of the school day is now starting to be recognised as having an impact on children's development and their overall wellbeing and engagement in school and learning.

Central to this is the increasing recognition that playtimes are more than just times for kids to 'go outside and let off steam' as a break from the 'real learning'. There is a growing awareness among Australian educators that playtimes are in fact legitimate parts of the school day and that schools do better when catering for children's play needs as

² The occurrence of a 'yard incident' needs to be reported where a child's behaviour is significantly inappropriate to warrant formal discipline, usually resulting in time outside the Principal's office in the post-lunch period.

part of their overall educational needs. Yet few, if any, Australian schools have a formal play policy or risk management policy driving the culture of play to achieve this for the school community.

To a degree, Australian Government education policy has also impacted children's ability access rich play experiences while they are at school. Whilst there may be little or no direct government regulation of playtimes, there is a strong emphasis on improving educational outcomes, notably numeracy and literacy, as the overriding priority for school leaders in Australia. The core business of schools is the education of children and they are given a certain amount of autonomy in relation to curriculum delivery and other educational experiences. But they are also held accountable through a variety of indicators that measure a school's success or otherwise, including annual national testing (NAPLAN), attendance and yard incident data, along with staff, parent and student opinion surveys. Schools have the ability to provide a range of learning opportunities based on the needs of their specific communities and can measure their progress against other schools in the state, as well as schools with similar cohorts.

Traditionally, Australian school playgrounds have largely consisted of fixed play equipment, grassed ovals and one or more asphalt courts with assorted line markings. There are usually lots of rules and out-of-bounds spaces and an over-emphasis on the provision of ball games and organised sport. In the words of Prue Walsh, they are "monuments to misunderstanding"³. Also to be considered is the Australian obsession with sport and physical activity, which is often passed off as "play" for children, either at school or in after school activities. In the main, Australia identifies itself as a sporting nation and there is a strong emphasis placed on both playing and watching sport. With the exception of some inner urban schools, this is reflected in the relatively large amount of outdoor space provided in many primary schools and in part, explains the ubiquitous "footy oval" in schools across the nation. It is a curious feature, as only a smaller percentage of children, typically boys, will be utilising the footy oval during any given lunchtime, with the remainder of children being left with few play options.

Play for Life's ethos, one shared by many, is that learning is not confined to the four walls of the classroom when a teacher is present, and that children are continuously learning⁴ – in the classroom, then out on the playground, then back again in the classroom and so it goes for children throughout the school day and after hours. The sum total of the day for them is (or should be) a seamless transition between these two learning environments. Given that the 'core business' of schools is learning and teachers are classically trained in the art of pedagogy, the application of an education lens to children's playtimes is a natural tendency for educators. However, this can be fundamentally at odds with a playwork approach, where a high value on play for play's sake and is based on a deep understanding that for children, play is not about improved education outcomes but rather it is about play and the act of playing. Whilst the worlds of education and playwork may appear to be diametrically opposed, what they share is the wellbeing of the child at the centre of their work.

Australia does not have an identifiable playwork sector and typically, pre-service training for teachers undertaking a Bachelor of Education does not include any specific instruction in providing a rich play experience for children during their playtimes. Unlike teachers in other countries such as England, Australian primary school educators are required to carry out daily supervision of the playground on a roster system. Many teachers will admit the only instruction in play they received was their first day on the job by following another teacher around the yard. Typically, teachers view yard duty as a form of "guard duty", following a well-worn track around the yard "like

mountain goats”, either ignoring or interfering in the activities of the students, and counting the seconds until they can return to the staff room. For the kids however, it is all about the playtimes, which are the pinnacle of their school day, albeit it a positive or negative experience for them.

Unsurprisingly, some schools are finding playtimes increasingly problematic for everybody, students and teachers alike. Australian schools, on average, dedicate 25% of the school day to outdoor free play, although these non-directed times are not formally mandated by departments of education and can be reduced or modified as a school sees fit. In order to counteract the growing behavioural challenges and rising tensions on school playgrounds, some schools are implementing a variety of reductive measures, such as shortening the lunchtime play to twenty minutes (down from the standard fifty minutes), segregating play spaces according to age and banning touching, hugging, cartwheels or other forms of play. Yet these reductive measures are not necessarily translating into more positive playgrounds, or improving education outcomes and increasing a child’s engagement with school. In our observations of school playgrounds, these types of measures are only compounding the problems, as they do not allow children to develop and master the crucial play skills they need.

There is another significant development currently impacting our school playgrounds which is, perhaps, uniquely Australian. In 2007, the Australian Federal Government introduced a policy known as 'Building the Education Revolution' (BER), a large-scale infrastructure initiative whereby primary schools across the nation received a brand new hall, library or classrooms on their school grounds. Government schools were allocated a building based on a formula which did not always marry with individual school needs. Without any consideration given to the play spaces being affected, the BER buildings were often constructed over key play spaces which children had occupied and felt a significant connection to through their play. The old tree where Hide-and-seek had been played for generations was bulldozed; 'Tiggy' could no longer be played where the big new hall now stands. In some inner urban schools, up to a third of the playground was reclaimed for the BER buildings, with inadequate provision for play made in the smaller, remaining space. Many of our school playgrounds are not faring well in a post-BER climate, where the large-scale destruction of play spaces has taken place across the nation. Without consultation with the people most affected by the loss of play space, the children, a large-scale form of 'play deforestation' has occurred without protest or acknowledgement.

Creating more positive playgrounds in schools

Since 2010, Play for Life has been working directly with children and builds the capacity of teachers, families and the community to support the child’s need and right to play. It works specifically to support schools to develop a culture of play and playfulness with a more holistic and tolerant attitude towards children’s play. In the mind of the child, it is the playtimes which form the most important part of their school day, not maths, reading or science. So it would follow, from their perspective, getting playtime right leads to getting school right, the net result of which looks like this:

Love Playtime = Love Learning = Love School.

With all of this propelling it forward and funded by Australian philanthropy, Play for Life embarked on an ambitious pilot project in Australian education – to see children’s experiences of school and learning transformed by

revolutionising their experience of the playground. Whilst predominantly an education initiative, Play for Life entered relatively uncharted waters by introducing internationally-proven principles of playwork onto Australian primary school playgrounds.

By fusing a new “playwork approach”⁵ to the supervision of the playground, Australian teachers are exposed to new professional learning to assist them in creating a rich play environment for children. But there was a risk that the playwork concepts driving the work would not be supported by Australian teachers, in particular the decision makers, school Principals. In addition, given the current focus in Australian education on numeracy and literacy and NAPLAN⁶ test scores, what happens during the 'forgotten parts of the day', the playtimes, is not high on the list of education priorities for Australian schools and as a consequence is poorly funded.

Drawing on highly successful programs out of the UK⁷ and the USA⁸, the *Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools* Program was developed over the pilot period, but calibrated to meet the needs of an Australian education system. The Program fundamentally works on three equally important levels to bring about change on the playground:

1. Improving the physical space children have to play in;
2. Improving the attitudes to play and the prevailing culture of play in the school community; and
3. Improving children’s play skills by providing more choice in their play.

The Play for Life POD

A key component is the Play for Life POD, which operates as a central part of the *Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools* Program. The POD, as it is affectionately known by the children, is a modified shipping container filled with loose-parts play materials, thoughtfully selected to promote open-ended, self-directed play opportunities, should the children choose to interact with it. Referred to as 'POD Scrap', to the untrained eye the loose-parts are little more than recycled industrial off-cuts and other clean waste that would have found its way to landfill but for the POD. But to the children, the old car tyres, long cardboard tubing and sailcloth present a whole world of imaginative play possibilities not currently found on most Australian primary school playgrounds. The POD Scrap is carefully selected to help address the play developmental issues by promoting certain types of play experiences, and is changed over as children move through different play development stages.

Typically, the arrival of the POD in their playground generates an enormous amount of excitement in the children which, in some instances, if it were left unabated, could be likened to the frenzy of a Myer Boxing Day Sale⁹. These rapturous, welcoming scenes highlight most poignantly how inadequate many Australian primary school playgrounds are in meeting children’s play needs or providing a rich play experience for them.

Practical Examples of Change in Schools

Play for Life has worked with 23 Victorian primary schools since inception in piloting a playwork approach to moderating playtimes in schools. All of the schools have deployed the Play for Life POD, usually early in the partnership and to date, all school have continued on the Program. The following is the journey of two of its Partner Schools but also draws on the broader experience of the work of Play for Life in general.

Coolaroo South Primary School, Melbourne, Australia

Coolaroo South Primary School is a culturally rich school community with an enrolment of 315 students and a Kindergarten enrolment of 70 students. The school is situated in the northern suburbs of Melbourne in a community of many different nationalities and recent arrival families, with over 85% of the students coming from a family who don't have English as their first language. There are over 20 different languages spoken within the school community and for many families, the school is the first point of contact in their new country. Coolaroo South Primary has been working with Play for Life since 2012.

Noble Park Primary School, Melbourne, Australia

Noble Park PS has a student enrollment of 320 and similarly to Coolaroo South PS, 88% of its students come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many have, or have had, refugee status or are asylum seekers. There are over 40 languages spoken on the playground with, Cambodian and Vietnamese and Sudanese, Burmese and Afghan languages being the most common. The school ascribes to the ethos that 'it takes a village to raise a child' and to that end, it has a number of well-established partnerships with corporate and not for profit organisations to support the school. It has been working with Play for Life since 2011.

Both Coolaroo South PS and Noble Park PS have students from similar cultural backgrounds and view these cultural factors as playing a significant role in why their children needed support with their play. These factors can be summarized as:

- Given their refugee or recent arrival backgrounds, many students have experienced trauma on their journey to Australia
- The local areas they live in and where their school is located are not safe, so many parents are reluctant to let their children "play out" after school.
- Families live in housing where there is little outdoor play space or with limited or no yards
- Families are new to the area, do not speak the same languages and are not yet connected to their community so, typically, there are low levels of community connectedness
- Some children (most often, the girls) go home and support their mothers with housework, childcare and cooking, which does not allow them much time to play
- For many children and their families, play has not been something accessible or it has been quite restrictive.

The schools cite that it was a combination of events that took place serendipitously that forced them to consider creating change for their children's playtimes. The *Building the Education Revolution* (BER) initiative introduced a new style of open-learning spaces and encouraged teachers to reconsider how children learn best in the 21st century. It was clear to the school leadership that with the impact of the BER buildings leaving large parts of the playground either destroyed or reclaimed that "we couldn't just keep doing as we had always done; it was time to do things differently".

In bringing change, the objective was to:

- Encourage students to build relationships with peers and others
- Improve resilience
- Provide choices for play
- Trial the Play for Life POD
- Develop different areas that supported different types of play
- Support the students to understand how to manage reasonable risk (and understand what reasonable risk is)
- Build student connectedness
- Have a smooth link from indoors to outdoors
- Teachers to use the outdoor learning spaces to conduct lessons, read, connect with the environment and use play as an opportunity for children to learn with and from each other.

While the schools may have recognised how essential play was to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional needs of children, the families didn't necessarily understand or share this view. Many children were fearful of the schoolyard and for some children, playtime at school had been a daunting prospect. In the large, wide-open areas dedicated to play, there was lots of running and for some there was a sense of isolation and they felt exposed. It was an important part of the journey for the schools to engage the families and talk about the importance of play as well as offering as many opportunities as possible for the families to actually engage in play with their children.

Most often, the reformation of the playtimes also coincided with other changes concurrently taking place in the schools. These have included the adoption of a play-based curriculum from Prep through to Grade 6 and the introduction of personalised learning at Noble Park PS or education frameworks such as Kids Matter at Coolaroo South PS. For Noble Park PS, which is implementing the *Australian Developmental Curriculum*, reforming the playtimes has meant an extension of personalised learning across the whole school day and not confined to classroom time only.

The schools both claim that the very first evidence of change occurring was in the attitude of teachers. Teachers are well intentioned and want to do the best for their students. However, primary school educators are, in general, not coming from a place of knowledge and understanding regarding the play needs of children. Conventionally, they have been trained to educate in classrooms, and play is what children do when they are not learning.

In the lead-up to the completion of the new *BER* buildings, the staff began to discuss the new rules for the new playground, based on old understandings. Typically, the "old understandings" saw teachers adopting a punitive approach to supporting children's play: No playing near the buildings in the nooks and crannies! No playing behind the portable building! No playing in amongst the trees! No playing with sticks! No water in the sand pit! No playing near puddles! And, most definitely, no climbing trees! At the foremost of teachers' minds in this punitive approach was their duty of care owed to the children they had been entrusted with on yard duty and the fear of an injury occurring on their watch.

In adopting a "playwork approach" to yard duty, teachers were able to investigate their duty of care more deeply and were encouraged to view play on their playgrounds through a different lens. The terms 'reasonable risk' and 'safe

enough' were introduced, and the importance of different spaces for different types of play was discussed. There has been ongoing professional learning and support regarding play, lots of robust conversation, and, over time, this it has led to a change in attitude amongst staff. Although in many ways these schools can say they have adopted the attitude of "schools without rules" when it comes to playtimes, there are occasions where the duty of care requires more conventional intervention. Where children are at risk, this may require children to be supported in different ways by redirecting their play along more formal lines as predicated by school policy. At these times, negotiated interventions occur at the point of need and in accordance established school policies and programs where a child is at risk.

The critical success factor to the reframing of risk for these schools has been the support for risk-taking by school leadership. Leadership understands the value of play at school and has supported staff to undertake study tours to gain a deeper understanding of the principles of playwork.

Schools without Rules

So, what does playtime look like now?

The playground is now a hub of activity with children of all ages sharing, cooperating, constructing and creating. There are almost no rules or out of bounds areas in the playground. Noble Park PS, for example, has re-badged yard duty as "Play Support and Relationship Building". Children make choices about their play in a variety of spaces. They can sit and chat in a secret nook, they can climb a tree or they can build a cubby out of spare parts- natural or POD scrap or both. They can search for bugs in the forest or walk across a puddle after constructing a bridge of planks. They can play tiggy, hide and seek or kick a ball. They can even get wet on a hot day.

And the teachers are watching, interacting and sometimes, guiding or resetting. They are aware of the risks as well as the benefits of play and they allow the children to make decisions and resolve their own conflicts. They at times join in the play when invited by the children, and also stay out of the play at other times. They also have a greater understanding of the importance of play and families engaged to see the child-centred play in action.

In some ways, these schools feel they have only just begun on their play journey. In other ways, they have already travelled a great distance in what has been achieved to date.

Play for Life's work during its pilot phase has revealed much about how play is faring in Australia. Much of its experience and findings to date predictably reflect the outcome of research conducted both in Australia and internationally and also found in key issues determined by the General Comment handed down by the United Nations on Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In encouraging teachers to adopt a playwork approach to yard supervision, they are better prepared to perform a key role in developing 21st century schools in an ever-changing education climate. There is much work to be done in Australia in providing teachers (and parents) with foundational skills in play literacies to help them support rich play experiences for children. This can be achieved within a system of education and if this were able to be

attained, we will see an era of education where playtime for children in our schools is no longer a 'yard duty' to be performed but rather a dynamic part of a child's development and the attainment of high education outcomes.

To view the Play for Life POD in action, please visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpqclzO9Ylw>

For further information:

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ENDNOTES

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³ Walsh, P(2006) Creating Child Friendly Cities: A Practitioner's Perspective, in B. Gleeson and N. Snipe (Eds) *Creating Child Friendly Cities: Reinstating kids in the City*. Pp. 136 – 150, Routledge, London and New York.

⁴ Csoti R & Rothstadt D: *Where Children Learn*, International Dialogue on Relational Learning for Leadership, 2013, New Mexico

⁵ Editor's Note: The Playwork Approach contained in the Program was principally created by Mike Dessington, a UK-trained Playworker and Play Development Adviser, working with Play for Life

⁶ Editor's note: The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Introduced in 2008, it tests students' skills in literacy and numeracy. <http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/naplan.html>

⁷ Children's Scrapstore's 'PlayPod' program, <http://www.childrensscrapstore.co.uk/>

⁸ Imagination Playground USA, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/imaginationplayground/>

⁹ Editor's note: Myer is a large Australian retail company with department stores in many cities. Myer traditionally begins its yearly cut-price sales on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day, attracting large crowds.