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Football Pitches and Barbie Dolls: young children's perceptions of their school playground

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1 **Football Pitches and Barbie Dolls: young children’s perceptions of**
2 **their school playground**

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Abstract

Playgrounds and play times offer valuable contexts for children to explore and learn about themselves and their social lives. This study sought to gather evidence of children’s perceptions of their playgrounds and play times, specifically whether the playgrounds were seen positively or negatively and the types of activities in which they engaged. Child-oriented methods were adopted inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss 2001). The main themes from the focus group interviews were social play (friendship, loneliness / solitude and fair play); physical activity play (activities and rationale); risk (injuries and bullying); and gender (action / stillness and gendered roles). Research suggests that segregation declines when adult supervision supports shared play, and our experiences suggest that such intervention is the most likely solution to the ‘problem’ of gender play in this setting.

Keywords: primary school; children; play; break time; gender; football

1 **Football Pitches and Barbie Dolls: young children's perceptions of** 2 **their school playground**

3

4 **Introduction**

5

6 *Playgrounds*

7

8 Playgrounds are a near-universal feature of schools in most developed countries.

9 Time for non-curricular play (called variously play time, break time or recess) is a
10 mandatory element in the school day in each of the UK's home countries, constituting
11 approximately 7 hours of children's time per week, equating to about a quarter of
12 their school day. Primary school children can experience up to 600 play times a year
13 (based on 3 times a day, 5 days a week, 39 weeks a year; Stratton, 2000).

14 In light of their ubiquity, it is perhaps surprising that playgrounds and play
15 times have been relatively overlooked by educational and health researchers.

16 Compared with studies of the formal curriculum, research into play times is
17 fragmented and still emerging. Yet, these situations present unique opportunities to
18 understand children's social and physical activity. Play times are opportunities for the
19 children to participate in activities relatively free from adult attention and classroom
20 structure, where important social networks can be built (Blatchford, 1998).

21 Playgrounds and play times offer valuable contexts for children to explore and learn
22 about themselves and their social lives. Their place within the school day, as well as
23 the significance attributed to them by pupils, means that playgrounds can also be
24 distinctive spaces to support and channel children's development (Blatchford, 1998).

1 Historically, playgrounds have been seen as supplements to the main business
2 of schooling, taking place in the classroom. Early advocates talked about the role of
3 playgrounds in moderating moral behaviour (Pellegrini, 2005). Later, playground
4 spaces were used to contribute to children's health and fitness, socialization and
5 general play activities (Thomson, 2005). The last two decades have witnessed a
6 further growth in interest in the use / misuse of school playgrounds. This interest has
7 often had one of two approaches (Towers, 1997): what could be called the 'romantic
8 view' (emphasizing what children learn and enjoy at playtime); and the 'problematic
9 view' (emphasizing issues such as bullying, disruptive behaviour, and gender
10 inequalities) (Frey, et al., 2005). More recently, a third approach has emerged as a
11 number of studies have evaluated the role of playgrounds in promoting health-related
12 physical activity (Ridgers, Stratton & Fairclough, 2006); what might be called the
13 'public health view'. In all cases, there is an implicit acknowledgement of the
14 importance of play times and playground spaces as significant parts of children's
15 schooling. As a result of this, many schools have started offering pupils different
16 activities and alternative uses of playground space, such as quiet areas, gardens, sports
17 zones, play equipment and seating. Overall, greater awareness of the significance of
18 playgrounds and play times has meant that schools are often exploring ways to change
19 the terrain of the playground from a 'bleak and uninspiring enclosure' into an
20 environmentally child-friendly area (Titman, 1992).

21

22 ***Playground design***

23

24 One way in which schools have addressed the perceived need for more interesting
25 playgrounds has been development of new forms of design. Research indicating that

1 positive playground environments can promote increased physical activity, the
2 learning of new skills (Van Beurden, et al., 2003), and improved classroom learning
3 (Pellegrini, Huberty & Jones, 1995), has prompted some schools to re-think their
4 playground and play time provision: 'In order for children to make choices about
5 their playtime activities, schools should ... provide adequate supervision and
6 playground environments to facilitate this choice' (Ridgers, Stratton, Curley & White,
7 2005, p. 1).

8 A number of studies have explored the relationship between playground
9 design and children's behaviour. Most have focused on the contribution such designs
10 can make to children's levels of physical activity, and have adopted a quantitative /
11 statistical approach. For example, a longitudinal project based in the North-West of
12 England examined the effects of an intervention involving playground markings and
13 physical structures. It found positive but not statistically significant increases in
14 children's play time physical activity following the implementation of the re-design.
15 However, longer daily play times allowed children to engage in more moderate-to-
16 vigorous physical activity (Ridgers, et al., 2007). Another study, based in Belgium,
17 found that the provision of games equipment during break times was effective in
18 increasing children's physical activity levels (Verstraete, et al., 2006). Smith (2007)
19 highlights the issues regarding initiatives for design (Thomson, 2003) and restrictions
20 on children's play due to concerns for safety (Evans, 1994), and the need for these to
21 be balanced with creating an environment encouraging freedom of expression and
22 creativity (Fabian, 2005). Previous research has often been based on assumptions that
23 methodological tools used for adults, are also suitable to use when researching
24 children, such as questionnaires. Methodological reflections (for example, Smith's
25 (2007) claim that questionnaire output has a lack of imaginative responses, and

1 Thomson's (2007) view that adult-style interviews often elicited only short,
2 perfunctory answers from children) highlight the need for more child-orientated
3 methods, such as those recommended by Clark and Moss (2001; 2005).

4

5 *Pupils' Views of their Playgrounds*

6

7 Playgrounds and playtime can figure prominently in pupils' feelings and attitudes
8 towards school as a whole. For many children, playgrounds are 'their areas' (Evans,
9 1996). In the UK, Primary School pupils spend approximately a quarter of their
10 school day on playgrounds, and there is evidence that memories of play times remain
11 in children's minds after much of the formal school experiences have faded away
12 (Blatchford, 1998). Some researchers, during what might be called the 'high tide' of
13 playground research in the 1990s, carried out detailed studies that included the
14 elicitation of children's views (for example, Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990;
15 Blatchford, 1998; Evans, 1996). There has been some important observational studies
16 of playground behaviour (for example, Bailey, et al., 1995; Baines & Blatchford,
17 2009; Marron, 2008; Stratton, et al., 2007; Thomson, 2007), and others have explored
18 pupils' views of 'problems' that might emerge at break times (Boulton, 1999; Leff, et
19 al., 2003). However, it is noteworthy that relatively few studies have focused on
20 asking the perceptions of those who experience playgrounds most directly, namely
21 children. Recent years have seen an increase in participatory research methods (e.g.,
22 Einarsdotti's longitudinal study based in Iceland, 2005a; 2005b; 2007), exploring
23 children's views of their playgrounds. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that
24 there is a need for further research listening to the voices of young people and how
25 they, as the 'experts' of their worlds (Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990), see the

1 space and envisage ways in which they would like their play environments to be
2 improved.

3

4 ***Gender Play***

5

6 One aspect of children's experiences in play time that has been subject to quite
7 substantial study is gender. Numerous studies have given evidence that boys and girls
8 rarely voluntarily play together (reviewed in Maccoby, 1998). Gender segregation in
9 children seems to begin around three years of age and peaks at around 8 to 11 years
10 (ibid.). One recent English study (Paechter & Clark, 2007) with nine and ten year
11 olds, found that boys' dominance was marked in terms of participation in football.
12 Girls' dominance was often defined in terms of stillness, just sitting and talking.

13 There was some evidence that this was not always welcome – some of the girls were
14 acutely aware that the boys had more freedom of movement than they did, both within
15 the playground and outside. While this was accepted for the most part, for some of
16 the girls it became increasingly difficult to maintain their identity as an active person
17 as a girl (ibid). Football appears to be more than just a game, symbolising differences
18 in play activities, intensities and opportunities between boys and girls (Skelton, 2000).

19

20 **Method**

21

22 This study sought to gather evidence of children's perceptions of their playgrounds
23 and play times. We were keen to follow an open-ended approach that would allow
24 the children to express their views as they felt fit. However, there were certain areas
25 of particular interest, such as whether the playgrounds were seen positively or

1 negatively, the types of activities in which they engaged, and the children's ideas for
2 improving the playground space.

3

4 *The School and its Pupils*

5

6 The study took place in a Primary School in South West London. The borough in
7 which the school resides is predominantly white (12% minority ethnic groups) and
8 wealthy (341 out of 354 in overall indices of deprivation). The school itself attracted
9 a more diverse population than most of the surrounding wards, including children
10 from Asian and immigrant Eastern European families. The school was relatively new,
11 and had only run classes up to Year 4 (8 / 9 year olds) at the time of the study. It was
12 a 'health-promoting school', and the invitation for us to work with them was based on
13 a stated commitment to develop a greater understanding of the factors linked with
14 children's well-being. Staff had expressed concerns that some children seemed
15 nervous and isolated in the playground. So the research project was perceived as the
16 first stage of an evaluation and re-design of the school's play spaces.

17 Every child in the school (n=137) participated in the curriculum-related
18 activities, although 13 had not given consent to take part in associated research at the
19 time of this study, and so their data were omitted. The sample (n=124) was of a
20 relatively homogenous nature as the controlled variables in this study were of similar
21 sized groups as shown in Table 1.

22

23 ! INSERT TABLE 1 HERE!

24

1 ***The approach***

2

3 From the first discussions with the school, it was agreed to involve the children in the
4 study and for the researchers to listen and learn from the children's experiences in
5 their environment. While significant others (teachers and other staff), whose views
6 might directly impact upon those of the children, were also consulted, our concern
7 was first and foremost with the views and beliefs of the children themselves.

8 Underpinning this approach was a commitment to the philosophy that children should
9 be active participants in their own learning. This is keeping within a view of learning
10 as a collaborative process between adults and children, and between children and their
11 peers (Bruner, 1985). If young children are acknowledged as playing an active part in
12 a search for meanings, then their own perspectives on this learning process become of
13 paramount importance (Brooker, 2002). We sought to develop research methods and
14 approaches with this philosophy in mind.

15 A particularly influential theoretical perspective for this study was the 'Mosaic
16 Approach' (Clark & Moss, 2001):

17 'A mosaic is an image made up of many small pieces, which need to be brought together
18 in order to make sense of the whole. The Mosaic approach gives young children the
19 opportunity to demonstrate their perspectives in a variety of ways, calling on their
20 "hundred languages".' (Clark & Moss, 2005, 13-14)

21 The Mosaic Approach at its core, offers a framework for listening to children's voices
22 in a way that is not invalidated by the differences in power that inherently exist
23 between adults and children. Our choice of research methodology was deliberate: we
24 wanted to create a situation in which the children were recognised as the real experts
25 of their lives, and in which the dialogue between children and researchers was a
26 conversation rather than an interview. In this context the child is the authority, and

1 can choose to reveal whatever s/he wish. There are no right or wrong answers, only
2 interpretations.

3 So, the basic idea was to use these child-orientated methods to encourage them
4 to feel empowered as the 'expert' in the research setting (Blatchford, Creeser &
5 Mooney, 1990). Rather than ask the children a series of pre-planned interview
6 questions, as is the normal in this sort of research (Grieg & Taylor, 1999), we were
7 keen to create a context in which the participants felt fully able to talk about their
8 views and experiences. So, the preparatory research activities were intended to make
9 the research more fun and engaging (Fargus-Malet, et al., 2010) and give the children
10 more control over the focus and agenda (Sanders & Munford, 2005). This, therefore,
11 generated a facilitative context for purposeful conversations. We were concerned
12 with the validity of the research due to the potentially superficial data gathered during
13 short visits by adult researchers and the 'correct' answers that some of the children
14 may have felt required by an adult authority figure (Needless to say, we did not
15 consciously present ourselves as figures of authority. However, it would be naïve to
16 suppose that adults who looked like teachers and, perhaps, acted like teachers, would
17 not be treated by the children as teachers). Previous research (Thomson, 2007) has
18 shown that a familiarisation period allows the children to get to know who the
19 researchers are and relax in their environment, without seeing them as adults actively
20 engaging and influencing their school life. We spent approximately six months
21 regularly visiting the school, talking to pupils and staff and observing lessons and
22 playtimes before the data-gathering began. However, at no point did we teach or help
23 in lessons (although one of us had previously worked as a teacher of this age group);
24 we were explicit that they were interested in finding out about life at the school.

25

1 *Ethics*

2

3 A letter explaining the aims and approaches of the study was sent to parents of all 137
4 children, inviting consent for their children to participate in the research activities.
5 Previous research (e.g., Thomson, 2007) has relied on teachers explaining to the
6 children the research project. The teacher had also asked the children to behave and
7 treat the visitor well, which may have encouraged bias responses due to a reduction in
8 natural behaviour and skewed the perceived power relationship. In the current study,
9 the we collected data from one class at a time starting with talking to the class as a
10 whole explicitly stating who they were and the purpose of the research, explaining
11 that the children were the experts and that their views were considered important to
12 future improvements in the playground. The children were then given time to ask us
13 questions and were encouraged to ask questions throughout the research. The
14 children were invited to assent verbally and actively to take part in the different
15 activities, as they occurred. Both consent and assent were based on the presumption
16 that the children and their parents agreed to the following: that every measure was
17 taken to ensure that the participants and their parents were informed of the aims and
18 methods of the study, and its constituent parts; that participation in the research was
19 entirely voluntary; and that participants can withdraw themselves and their data from
20 the study at any point without explanation (Jago & Bailey, 2001). We were
21 concerned that the children may not feel comfortable saying they wanted to withdraw
22 from the study due to being in a classroom activity environment. We were, therefore,
23 wary for any children showing nonverbal actions and gestures that indicated that they
24 no longer wished to take part (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005).

25

1 *Procedure*

2

3 The basic procedure adopted in this study was as follows (see Figure 1):

4

5 ! INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE!

6

7 Preparatory activities consisted of short presentations of photographs of the
8 playground, during which the children were encouraged to comment on what they had
9 seen. These were led by the teachers and purely used as a stimulus. The children
10 then moved on to the playground and groups gave us a ‘tour’ of the area. These
11 ‘participatory appraisal’ methods (Clark, 2005) encouraged the children to share their
12 local knowledge with us informally (Clark & Moss, 2001; Johnson, et al., 1998). The
13 children then remained in the playground, and drew pictures of themselves within the
14 playground. Drawing can be seen as a language that can be used as one method of
15 capturing children’s lived experiences (Alerby, 2003). We originally used the actual
16 drawing to analyse, however it is listening to the drawer’s opinions regarding the
17 drawing process and discussions arising from this that has been found more useful
18 (Cameron & Clark, 2004; Driessnack, 2005). The drawings and the children’s
19 accompanying narratives were both seen as integral for the meaning-making process
20 (Wright, 2007). Drawing offers a focus for children’s comments, provides a richer
21 data set, and is also a way of putting children at ease, as drawing is a common activity
22 for young children (Sanders, et al., 2005).

23 We then talked to every child in each class about what and who they have
24 drawn. The content of these descriptions was then written on a specially designed
25 label. This method was not only used to ensure that every child’s ideas had been

1 included within the study, but also to act as a stimulus to inspire the children and
2 encourage them to think further about their playground. This ensured that the
3 children's perceptions of their drawings process were used as data, rather than our
4 interpretations of the pictures (Einarsdotti, Dockett & Perry, 2009).

5 After the drawing tasks had been completed three boys and three girls from
6 each class were then invited to participate further in focus group conversations (two
7 focus groups from each class – gender-separated). Group interviews were chosen as
8 less daunting than one-to-one interviews and help to diffuse the balance of power
9 between the adult and child (Clark, 2005; Mauthner, 1997). The interviews were
10 semi-structured with one main request from the interviewer: *'Please tell me about*
11 *your picture'*. The researcher in each case ensured that all three children in the focus
12 group had an opportunity to answer this question and prompted if necessary by either
13 re-phrasing the question; asking questions reflecting on points just made by a
14 participant or questions for further clarification. This enabled the interviewer to play
15 as small a verbal role as possible during the interviews. The interviews lasted ten
16 minutes on average and were digitally record and transcribed verbatim.

17 Debriefing both the participants (children) and the body (school) are important
18 features of the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005). In this case, we sent a report to the
19 school, and the staff used this feedback to generate further ways to improve the
20 playground. The school recognised the importance of the children's opinions, were
21 supportive of the research and proactive in applying the results. We then revisited the
22 school and discussed the findings with each class, encouraging the children to provide
23 their feedback on both the findings and the proposed changes.

24

25 **Analysis**

1

2 All focus group transcripts and recorded comments from the drawing task were
3 analysed using a process of content analysis and selective coding. This involved
4 reading and re-reading the words, sentences, or a paragraph of verbatim text pertinent
5 to the main research themes. Individual meaning units were then summarised, and
6 then assigned to a sub-ordinate theme that was characterised by a descriptive sentence
7 and then labelled to summarise the collection of individual units. Sub-ordinate
8 themes were then attached with the original main themes of the conversation,
9 effectively acting as anchor points for data analysis. These steps were repeated with
10 each meaning unit identified within interview transcriptions.

11 We individually coded the transcripts, then met to discuss our interpretations
12 through analytical audit (Smith, 2004), and recoded in light of this conversation, using
13 'disconfirming evidence' as a validity procedure (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This
14 approach was followed in order to implement investigator triangulation (Denzin,
15 1978) to increase analytical credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This was enhanced
16 by the fact that the researchers came from different subject disciplines (Kimchi,
17 Polivka & Stevenson, 1991). They then deductively analysed the data, producing
18 revised identified themes (figure 2). Participants were assigned pseudonyms for
19 anonymity.

20 The debriefing session with the children enabled a form of member-checking
21 of the interview outcomes and allowed an opportunity for the children to give
22 feedback on how well the findings captured their experience. We hoped that this
23 procedure would facilitate participant-researcher collaboration and increase credibility
24 by enhancing the contribution of participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln &

1 Guba, 1985). This in turn aimed to enhance the children's feelings of autonomy
2 within the research process (Sanders & Munford, 2005).

3

4 **Findings**

5

6 Final qualitative themes derived from both the labels on the back of the pictures and
7 the interview transcripts are summarised in figure 2.

8

9 ! INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE!

10

11 *Social Play*

12

13 Most children discussed the social context of playground activities. Many of their
14 comments reflected an implicit association between play and friendship; for example:
15 *'I like playing It with my friends'* (Y2, girl); and *'We're happy and I'm playing with*
16 *my friends'* (Y2 Boy). Indeed, friendship groups presented both the main content and
17 context of the represented playground activities. An illustrative example was
18 provided by a girl in Y4:

19 'I've drawn me and my friends. Well one of my friends is hula-hooping and she's really
20 shocked that I've done a handstand, or cartwheel or whatever you want it to be for the
21 first time ever and my other friend is clapping; she's ready to hug me while I'm still
22 upside down.'

23 Conversations with the children about their playgrounds were littered with references
24 to friends. Some comments simply related enjoyment of certain types of activities
25 with friends' enjoyment – *'Because I kind of like football ... And my friends do'* (Y3

1 boy) – whilst others portrayed complex dances of interactions in which the game and
2 roles taken within it became inextricably bound together:

3 'It's a special game of It and someone was It, like Christian was first and we had to hide.
4 If someone, if Christian gets out of the bench we have to run to the bench. After that,
5 well Oliver was it and he saw Antonio there and he just came and punched him in the
6 tummy.' (Y2, boy)

7
8 Not surprisingly, perhaps, the social context of playground activities meant that
9 some children felt isolated and alone. Loneliness was the most frequently cited
10 negative association with the playground, and there were no evident differences
11 according to gender or age: *'I drawed [sic] me how I was crying ... Because I want to
12 play with someone and they said go away'* (Y1 boy) and *'I'm drawing myself on the
13 bench because I'm Lonely'* (Y2 girl). The children in this study spoke about their
14 upset at being *'left out'* (Y3 boy), and of seeing their friends playing together, but
15 without them:

16 'I enjoy, without being lonely, I would like my friends to always play with me instead of
17 being lonely because it makes me really upset when they don't play for the whole
18 playground – and once, today, yeah? No, today before yesterday, I was sitting lonely for
19 the whole morning playtime and then I didn't have a chance to play.' (Y2, girl)

20
21 One aspect of social isolation that emerged during this study that has not figured
22 significantly in many other studies is the enjoyment of being alone. A minority of
23 children (boys and girls) said that they enjoyed solitude on some occasions, and
24 expressed frustration at being forced to play with others. For example, when asked to
25 describe her picture, one girl (Y1) said that she had drawn herself playing on her own.
26 The interviewer (I) commented on the large smile sketched on her face:

27 I: 'Why are you happy?'

1 G: Because I'm on my own.

2 I: Do you like playing by yourself Grace?

3 G: Yeah.

4 I: Do you like playing with friends sometimes? Which do you prefer?

5 G: Playing on my own.'

6

7 The theme of fair play did not figure in the comments of the younger children
8 (Y1 and 2), but did emerge during conversations with older children. The failure of
9 peers to follow rules, roles and conventions of play were often cited as reasons for
10 games coming to an end or, at least, for becoming less enjoyable than they might
11 otherwise have been. One boy spoke about the need for a referee or 'judge' as an
12 arbitrator in the relatively complex games of the older children:

13 'It's kind of bad because one time there was a ... because everyone was in a row. It
14 happens every single day. See we don't have a judge who is going to actually do things
15 for us and he's not going to help us.' (Y3 boy)

16 Teaching assistants (TAs) were often called in to take on peace-keeping roles, but
17 even then success was not guaranteed:

18 'Also sometimes the TAs, sometimes the other children think that the TAs will forget its
19 blah-blahs turn we can just get another turn by standing outside the gate and saying it's
20 our turn. So they go to the gate and say it's their turn and then they get two or three goes
21 in the week. Which means that some classes don't get their turn.' (Y4 girl)

22

23 *Physical Activity Play*

24

25 The children were asked to draw themselves in the school playground. Not
26 surprisingly, perhaps, almost all of them drew themselves engaging in some sort of
27 activity (although there was no mention in the initial request for them to draw

1 anything in particular). The most frequently drawn and discussed activities involved
2 physical activity. These accounts are fairly representative:

3 'I've drawn some hopscotch and I'm going to draw some people queuing up behind the
4 tent because they're going to do it backwards because I can't just start here and draw all
5 the people here so everyone's going to be there and in the sandbox people are digging
6 and putting the sand into the buckets, but I didn't get to draw that ... So here is going to
7 be me hula-hooping and then I'm going to have the sun here and I'm going to have two
8 butterflies flying and then I'm going to have Thelma skipping and then when I go into
9 the garden I'm going to draw collected plants and things that have fallen on the floor'
10 (Y2, girl)

11

12 'This one was holding a rope and it went around when it came to you, you jumped over it
13 but these are all the people. This is Gary who's running away. He's going to jump over
14 the rope when it came' (Y1 girl)

15

16 One fascinating conversation between one of the boys in Year 2 and one of the
17 researchers suggests that physical activity, for him at least, was inextricably part of
18 his conception of play:

19 I: 'What do you like to do – very busy things or very quiet things in the playground?

20 S: Well very busy things in the playground but other than that it's normally sitting down
21 reading a book or sitting down doing an experiment.

22 I: And you like both of those?

23 S: Yeah but they're not really playground activities.

24 I: Aren't they?

25 S: On the playground it's normally running around.'

26

27 The children's accounts of physical activity play generally took one of two
28 forms: creative and locomotor play. The first type of play involved imagination and

1 the creation of characters: *'Maybe spies or something, and policemen'* (Y1 boy). In
2 one discussion, two boys were asked who they liked to be when they were pretending:

3 M: 'Policemen.

4 T: Soldier, one two three four, one two three four.

5 M: Firemen.'

6 Locomotor play was much more frequently cited, however, especially by the boys.

7 Younger children talked about hula hoops, hopscotch and climbing frames. And

8 children of all ages spoke about the joys of running and chasing, such as this Year 4

9 girl: *'And also I like the playground when some people are chasing after Pete the TA*

10 *and then there's most of the playground free to just walk around ...'*

11 However, by far the most frequently discussed form of playground activity among

12 this group of children was football:

13 'Ok, I'm playing football. I scored a goal. When I finished football Oliver locked

14 Christian in the door. I came back to play another game of football and then I scored

15 another goal and then after that game of football we went to line up.' (Y2, boy)

16 Approximately half of the boys in Years 2, 3 and 4 drew and spoke about themselves

17 playing football. We will return to the gendered character of football in the

18 playground later in this report. At this point, we will simply point out that only one

19 girl in our whole sample spoke about her involvement with football in a positive way:

20 *'And we're having a good time, we're kicking a football'* (Y3 girl), and this account

21 was not within the context of an actual game.

22 Only a few children used 'fun' to explain their reasons for playing: 'I like

23 skipping because it's fun' (Y1 girl), and only one other child spoke of values intrinsic

24 to an activity when asked why they played such games: 'What I like about football is -

25 I don't know. Scoring goals.' (Y2, boy). Everyone else spoke in rather instrumental

26 ways about the benefits of activity.

1 Health was the dominant discourse underlying the children's rationales for
2 playing physically active games. For example, these comments were representative
3 of numerous other statements: 'Well it's because then we can take equipment outside
4 and play sports so we can be healthy' (Y3 boy);

5 'So not just running around, we can run, climb on things – cause climbing is a very
6 exercises thing. Like if you climb high, if you go fast that will be very good because it's
7 exercise thing' (Y3 girl);

8 'Well it's a very special place for me cause [*sic*] I get to climb on it and it's a good
9 exercise. Football is a good exercise as well, but you get hurt but in a climbing frame
10 you don't because there's grass in it' (Y4 boy).

11 This 'health talk' was seen in terms of all aspects of playground activities:

12 I: 'What's so great about playing football on the playground?

13 E: It gives you exercise.

14 I: Right, and what's so good about that? Why is that important?

15 E: Because you can run faster and stuff.

16 A: I think its fun. You get exercise. The good thing about exercise is that you're
17 healthy. I mean you can really eat whatever you like if you're very well exercised
18 because you wouldn't be fat ... Yeah, it just makes you really fit. Running around. Like
19 climbing frame, it might make you fit but I think climbing frame is training for, like,
20 climbing trees – survival but I just think football is so fit, and if some people actually
21 really know what they're doing they'll understand. It's actually running around and it's
22 hard. You get sweaty and they wear nothing because they're just used to it. They're just
23 running around.' (Y4 boys)

24

25 ***Risk***

26

27 We only recorded one reference that might be interpreted as bullying: '*And some*
28 *people aren't very nice to them and once, I remember, John was playing a game and I*

1 *forgot who it was, and somebody said John couldn't play and it hurt his feelings'* (Y2
2 *boy*).

3 It seemed to be the case that most children's references to the dangers of their
4 playground were to either the nature of the space (e.g., it was concrete) and objects on
5 it (e.g., like a climbing frame) or to fears of injury.

6 There were numerous stories of injuries resulting from falling on the floor, such
7 as: 'And I don't like it when they hurt me. When someone hurts me... if I trip over
8 somewhere or someone hurts me' (Y1, boy);

9 J: 'That's just the concrete where we're playing it on.

10 I: What do you think about the concrete?

11 J: It's rough ... Sometimes we get over and ... ow!

12 I: And what does that mean?

13 J: That means we get hurt.' (Y3 boys)

14

15 The climbing frame, that appeared in many of the children's pictures of the
16 playground, was seen by some as the source of greatest danger: '*And they get injured,*
17 *they hurt your elbow. I fell off a climbing frame and broke my arm'* (Y4 boy);

18 'I don't really like the climbing frame because it's really crowded and they play lots of
19 really weird and unsafe games and I never go on it and some things like when everyone's
20 on – I've seen some people do this a few times – there's a bar, it's like here to the roof,
21 which is pretty high and people just jump off it and they could get really hurt.' (Y4 girl)

22

23 **Gender**

24

25 Not all of the children reported being physically active all of the time. Both boys and
26 girls spoke about quiet and still games, such as board games. However, there were a
27 far greater number of girls who spoke about non-physically active games than boys.

1 Only one boy drew a picture of a non-active game: *'I did draw a picture of me and my*
2 *friends doing a puzzle'* (Y1 Boy), whereas many girls drew and talked about similar
3 activities. Some of the girls spoke enthusiastically about the introduction of a new
4 'quiet area', away from the main play area: *'I like it at some parts it's quiet and you*
5 *can sit down on the decking and read a book'* (Y4 girl);

6 'Well there is something new in the playground, like there is a quiet area over there and
7 it has grass and you can read quietly or you can play chess and you can put a puzzle
8 together. I think it's really nice to like to calm down and to play a [...] game' (Y4 girl).

9
10 There was an overwhelming sense in the conversations with the children at this
11 school that gender segregation and stereotyping was simply taken for granted. It is
12 interesting, for example, that the only non-stereotypically male activity described
13 positively by a boy was from a Year 1 pupil who had recently entered the UK, and his
14 comments were received with astonishment by his peers:

15 I: 'What else do you like playing?

16 O: I like just walking.

17 I: Walking?

18 O: Or dancing.

19 T: Dancing?!

20 I: You like dancing?

21 O: Yeah.'

22

23 On the whole, there was a shared perception that boys and girls had different
24 interests and played different types of games. During one conversation with a group
25 of Year 1 girls, one child offered the view that *'there's not really girls' games and*
26 *boys' games really because everyone can like everything'*. Her peers responded by
27 explaining the seemingly obvious differences between the two types of games:

1 L: 'Well the boys play basketball.

2 I: All the boys?

3 A: Yeah and they play soccer, cricket...

4 L: Soccer, we say football.

5 I: And what do girls do then?

6 L: Well they just play hula hoping and skipping.

7 G [the girl who questioned the difference between girls' and boys' games]: No they
8 don't.

9 L: Well Mums and Dads, like that.

10 G: You could put like role play or like a shop.

11 A: Well we can build things in there like things we can go in and out of and play within
12 the playground instead of having outside things like climbing frames.'

13 A similarly clear division of activities was also upheld by a group of Year 2 boys:

14 O: 'Because it's quite a boy's game.

15 I: Oh, are there boys' games and girls' games?

16 A: No but the girls don't like to join boys' games they just like to do their own games
17 like Catch.

18 O: Well sometimes we play with the girls but sometimes not because we made our own
19 games and sometimes they catch us.

20 I: So if you play with girls do you play different games or do you play It?

21 O: Different games.'

22

23 A consequence of such a clean split between girls' and boys' activities was that
24 when the genders did come into contact with each other on the playground, their
25 presence was usually seen as an annoyance. Girls, in particular, complained about
26 interference of boys:

27 'when the boys are annoying you, you can rub your hands on the caterpillar [a plastic
28 tube in the playground] and you can go shock them' (Y4 girl);

1 'I'm going to draw three boys that are in year two and they're spying on us and saying
2 are you really – because that's what they do all the time and it's really annoying' (Y4
3 girl).

4

5 Some of the children drew playgrounds that they would like – ideal
6 playgrounds. In almost all cases, pictures reflected the personal interests of the artist.
7 However, a few children (mostly girls) exhibited awareness that not everyone shared
8 their interests. However, here too the pictures reflected strict gender divisions:

9 'And on the other side of the picture I've done some football – some children playing
10 football because usually boys talk about football in our school. I just thought that it's not
11 fair if only the girls have what they want, so I decided to put what girls want and boys
12 want.' (Y3 girl)

13 'Yes, Well I've done first a football pitch which I would like because the boys always
14 like football so I've let them have one, but a fence so they wouldn't knock my friend and
15 me - Harriet and me [*sic*], and there is [first aid] next to the football pitch so they don't
16 have to walk really far away from it. Here's where I put a pond because I love fishing
17 and I think I would put a little [first aid] where we are as well.' (Y3 girl)

18

19 There was only instance of boys speaking about the importance of meeting the
20 needs of girls. In this case, however, their understanding of girls' interests seems
21 rather less sophisticated!

22 A: 'And by the way, when we say that we want climbing frames it's not going to be fair
23 if we are going to use up the space for a climbing frame because all our school is going
24 to be doing is no sports, just lying down.

25 C: Yeah, but you have to do something for the girls.

26 I: That's interesting, but why can't the girls play football?

27 A: Exactly.

28 E: We can get Barbie stuff for them.

29 I: So you are saying get a Barbie set for the girls -

1 E: Yes.

2 A: Some girls don't like Barbies.

3 I: What do you think, can the girls play football?

4 A: Yeah, loads do.

5 I: Do girls play football?

6 C: Yeah, but then you need to have a game, like a girl's game because boys - they play
7 most.

8 I: And why can't girls and boys play together then?

9 A: Because boys are better.

10 I: Because boys are better at football?

11 A: And we're stronger and every time a girl does a mistake we get a bit angry at them
12 because they just muck up a chance and do their own goals.

13 I: Right, and what do you think Eric? That's an interesting point isn't it?

14 E: They don't even know what they're doing.

15 A: Yeah, they don't. They just maybe kick it out for a corner and then they kick it in the
16 girls corner [...] You can have girls football, but they train a lot.

17 I: They do train a lot. They train like the boys don't they, I guess?

18 C: Well I'm quite rubbish at football.

19 A: You're not that rubbish Christian you're better than some of the girls. As well the
20 girls have a straight leg and that's all they do. We curl.

21 I: The boys have more of a curl in it. Yeah, any other points? So we've got the idea of
22 breaking up the playground space. We've got -

23 E: Because girls don't really get the idea of football.

24 I: No?

25 A: But we don't really get the idea of Barbies.

26 I: No?

27 E: Yes. It's just like football and Barbies.' (Y4 boys)

28

29 **Discussion**

30

1 Analysis was carried out on both the individual interviews with all 124 children
2 during the drawing process and recorded on labels stuck to the back of their pictures;
3 and group interviews that took place at the end of the drawing task. There were four
4 overarching themes were social play (friendship, loneliness / solitude and fair play);
5 physical activity play (activities and rationale); risk (injuries and bullying); and
6 gender (action / stillness and gendered roles).

7 Conversations with the children about their playground largely involved
8 references to friends, interactions with others and the enjoyment of activities with
9 friends. The importance of friends is a consistent finding with many other studies
10 designed to listen to children's voices (Clark & Moss, 2001; Daycare Trust, 1998).
11 Feelings of loneliness were the most frequently cited negative emotion associated
12 with the playground, with no evident differences in gender or age. However, a
13 minority of children enjoyed playing in solitude and expressed frustration if
14 encouraged to play with other children. Social isolation has not figured significantly
15 in other studies and highlights the need for further research to this aspect of social
16 play.

17 The theme of fair play was not apparent with younger children (Y1 and 2) but
18 emerged during conversations with the older children. The older children were more
19 concerned about peers following rules and the need for more structured games with an
20 arbitrator in order to gain optimal enjoyment out of their play. Throughout the
21 primary school, the children of different ages have different needs and opinions
22 related to structure and enjoyment. It is important to approach the needs of all the age
23 groups and not assume that all ages require the same playground changes to aid their
24 development.

1 The majority of children discussed drawing activities of a creative or
2 locomotor nature (Smith & Pellegrini, 2008). As shown in previous research (e.g.,
3 Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney, 1990; Smith, 2007), football was a dominant game
4 played in the playground. There are lots of reasons why children might enjoy
5 physical activity play, and the academic literature suggests that ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’
6 figure predominantly (Dismore and Bailey, 2010). Interestingly, this was not the case
7 in this study as only a few children used ‘fun’ to explain their reasons for playing.
8 Everyone else spoke in rather instrumental ways about the benefits of activity, and
9 we, as researchers, wonder if this is associated in some way with the fact that the
10 school was a self-described ‘health-promoting school’. Health was the dominant
11 discourse underlying the children’s rationales for playing physically active games.
12 Further research is needed to investigate messages being received by the children
13 regarding motivations to participate in physical activity and other health behaviours,
14 comparing those that do and do not consider themselves as ‘health-promoting
15 schools’.

16 Informal conversations with teachers and non-teaching assistants suggested to
17 us that risk was a serious cause for concern among the children. In particular,
18 according to these adults, bullying was a suspected reason why some children did not
19 enjoy their time on the playground. Our discussions with the children did not offer
20 support for this worry. In fact, we recorded only one reference that might be
21 interpreted as bullying. This highlights the need to listen to the children’s voices as
22 adults’ and children’s perceptions of the same environment can often be different
23 (James, 1990). It seemed to be the case that most children’s references to the dangers
24 of their playground were to either the nature of the space (e.g., it was concrete) and
25 objects on it (e.g., like a climbing frame) or to fears of injury. Recent research (e.g.,

1 Thomson, 2007) has raised the issue regarding the restrictions and regulations applied
2 in the primary school's playground limiting children's opportunities to experience
3 small risks/hurts and expand their knowledge of their surroundings. The key issue is
4 the need for a balance between organising the playground to allow optimal enjoyment
5 and safety of the children, without restricting children's learning of their environment
6 and enabling them to acquire important tools of adaptability and social skills (Fabian,
7 2005).

8 There were many conversations emphasising gender segregation and
9 stereotyping over all ages, such as girls discussing non-physically active games more
10 than boys and both sexes reporting that more boys played football, corroborating with
11 previous literature (Maccoby, 1998; Paechter & Clark, 2007). Few pupils discussed
12 participating in activities not stereotypical to their gender, sometimes received with
13 astonishment by their peers (e.g., the boy who liked dancing). Many children showed
14 sophisticated thinking and reasoning skills in foreseeing possible problems with their
15 designed improvements to the playgrounds (Palmer, Suggate & Matthews, 1996), for
16 example some discussed raising money through a sponsored event to pay for
17 equipment. The older the children were, they more they discussed fairness across the
18 gendered play, trying to design a playground that catered for both girls and boys to
19 play in. However, this often resulted in enforcing stereotypes, such as boys having
20 football and girls having Barbie dolls to play with.

21 The school was proactive in addressing issues that emerged from this study.
22 Some of the examples of initiatives proposed to the children and then carried out
23 were: introducing segregated areas to play football in one and other games in others to
24 try and reduce the dominance of football and increase play areas for those not wanting
25 to play football; introducing a garden area, buying more equipment to try and

1 encourage girls to be more physically active, such as hula-hoops; and ‘training’ older
2 children to be buddies and try and make friends or encourage friend making to those
3 children who say they feel lonely in the playground. Updating the playground based
4 on the children’s feedback will help them feel more autonomous about their
5 environment (Sanders & Munford, 2005). It is clearly a positive step that children are
6 consulted, but there remains an issue of transferring children’s voices to a policy level
7 (Clark, 2005).

8

9 **Conclusion**

10

11 Play takes up a great deal of most young children’s disposable time budgets, and there
12 is little doubt that it is an important and necessary feature of their lives (Pelligrini,
13 2005). Nonetheless, it remains a highly contested subject among both researchers and
14 practitioners. Perhaps the most hotly debated theme has been the extent to which play
15 can and should express some pragmatic value (Sutton Smith, 1997). This paper does
16 not make any normative judgement about this matter, apart from suggesting that the
17 measureable and instrumental outcomes of play and playtimes in schools need not
18 exhaust their merit.

19

20 Playgrounds and play times are long-established ‘givens’ in primary schools in the
21 UK. Play times constitute a significant proportion of every school day, and represent
22 some of the most memorable features once pupils move away from school. Perhaps
23 their very ubiquity accounts for their relative neglect in educational research.

24 However, this study supports early work that suggests that play time / break time /
25 recess is a context for valuable insights into children’s behaviours, development and

1 well-being. Our primary interest here was children's perceptions of their
2 playgrounds. But even with this restricted aim, it has become apparent that
3 playgrounds are sites of contestation, social role playing and peer socialisation.
4 Indeed, it may well be that the freedom offered by play times offers a unique chance
5 for teachers and researchers to witness children's behaviours 'in the wild', away from
6 the surveillance of the classroom.

7

8 *What might they learn?*

9

10 Social and physical activity play dominated the conversations with the children in our
11 sample. Both forms of play elicited positive and negative emotions from the children,
12 and there was a sense that these situations were valuable contexts for learning about
13 and resolving some of the inherent tensions in a relatively safe arena. However, there
14 was little evidence of changing most of the children's attitudes to gender. Both boys
15 and girls seemed to take gender segregation for granted (and note that this is a school
16 with an entirely female teaching staff). One does not need to advocate a partisan
17 position to point out that this situation is problematic. Simply put, the girls in this
18 school experienced an impoverished playground experience, due to the dominance of
19 the boy, in general, and of football games, in particular. Research suggests that
20 segregation declines when adult supervision supports shared play, and our
21 experiences suggest that such intervention is the most likely solution to the 'problem'
22 of gender play in this setting.

23

24

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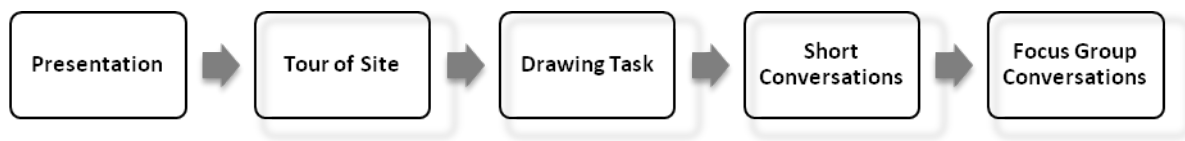


Figure 1: Methods used in this study

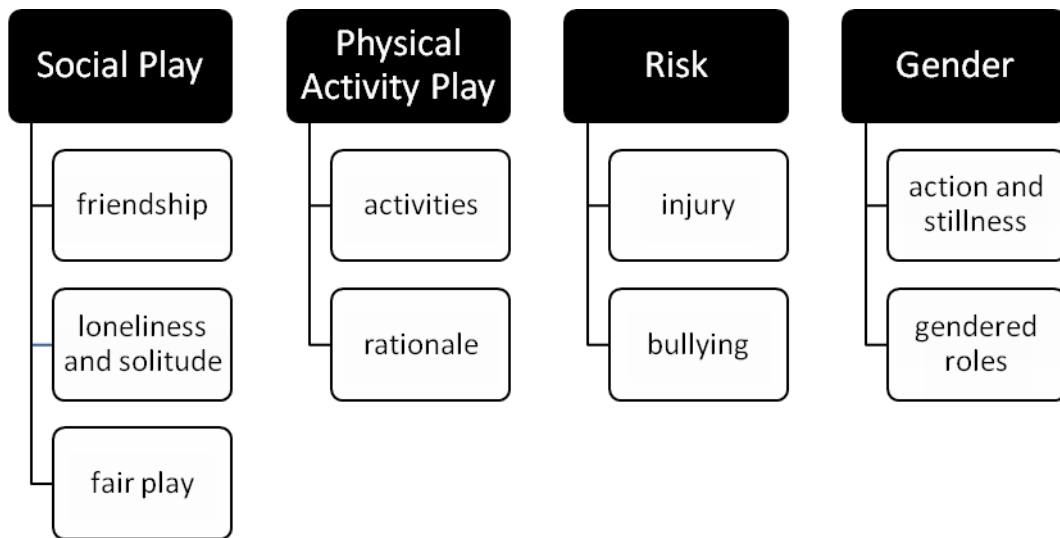


Figure 2: Emergent themes from the data

Table 1: the participants in the study

Variable	Group	%
Gender	Male	49
	Female	51
Year Groups	Reception	22
	Year one	23
	Year two	20
	Year three	22
	Year four	13