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Barbara Chancellor^a

^a School of Education, College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

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Primary school playgrounds: features and management in Victoria, Australia

Barbara Chancellor*

School of Education, College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

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This paper reports the results of an online survey of government primary schools conducted in June 2011 at Victoria, Australia. This study aimed to investigate how practical ways of individual school policy is impacting on playgrounds in the areas of playspace design, play equipment, rules and supervision of children during recess breaks. Data analysed in light of international and local research findings about children's play indicate that many schools are providing playgrounds with a wide range of play possibilities through provision of high quality, diverse playspaces incorporating natural features. It also shows that playground rules reflect teacher attitudes and understandings about children's play in the playground, demonstrating their belief in the need for surveillance and safety as paramount. This base line document is a foundation for future research and the large sample provides a 'big picture' against which individual schools can compare themselves.

Keywords: play; primary school playgrounds; playground rules

Introduction

Currently, the decisions about playground resourcing, rules and design in Australian schools are made at the local level. Each state and territory government is responsible for its schools and is required to ensure that school playgrounds comply with current Australian Standards (Standards Australia, 2012, retrieved from <http://www.standards.org.au>). Guidelines for schools within the states and territories refer to Australian Standards, but only those relating to the safety of fixed play equipment and soft fall are legislated. There are no government regulations that specify what school playgrounds should include and how they should be managed. The advantage of this approach is that it allows schools to meet their community needs and avoids the 'one-size-fits-all' outcome that centralised decision-making can lead to. However, this approach also allows schools to ignore the playground and prioritise the learning that occurs in the classrooms by channelling funds indoors rather than outdoors. Consequently, in Australia there is considerable variation in playground resourcing and management. While there have been a number of studies investigating the playgrounds of small numbers of schools, there is no Australian research showing how individual schools fit within a broader view. By gathering data across a large number of schools this shortfall can be addressed. While this survey was administered to government primary schools in the state of Victoria, it is suitable for schools in other Australian states and territories and it is good enough to be useful in international settings where a big picture is sought.

*Email: barbara.chancellor@rmit.edu.au

Background

Australian schools have not followed the path of many schools in the UK and in the USA, where Anthony Pellegrini describes a disturbing trend against recess breaks despite the significant research evidence supporting their educational value (Pellegrini, 2008). However, low-quality school playgrounds have been described in some previous Australian research, places where there is little for children to engage with, restrictive playground rules and few natural features. Evans described playgrounds as largely uninviting and uninspiring places with minimal play opportunities (Evans, 2003). While Kate Darian-Smith describes previous research that has shown all playgrounds do not fit this description (Darian-Smith, 2012), popular Australian media often portrays school playgrounds negatively. An article appearing in a Melbourne newspaper in October 2012 titled 'Alarm over slide in state of play' described two recent research studies conducted in Australian primary school playgrounds, one from Deakin University in Melbourne and the other from the University of Western Australia, and warned that something needed to be done urgently to reinvigorate school playgrounds and get more play happening (retrieved from <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/alarm-over-slide-in-state-of-play-20121026-28anc.html>). While research is being undertaken in Australian primary school playgrounds, the findings are isolated to small samples and it is difficult to see how these results fit within the bigger view. This situation leads to opportunities for misinterpretation of results and the danger of inadequate generalisations. By selecting all Victorian Government primary schools as the sample for this survey, a wider net has been cast. The resulting data will be useful as a base line document upon which future research can build.

As Elizabeth Wood has noted, play today is seen as being threatened and under attack (Wood, 2012). Many barriers that stop children engaging in play are well documented in the media in Australia and in other parts of the world. The over-organised and over-protected lives of children and the large numbers living in urban environments with limited access to safe outdoor play mean that opportunities for free outdoor play diminish or vanish altogether for many children. For children without backyards or access to local parks, their only chance to play together outside is likely to be at recess breaks in school. Consequently, schools today have an increasingly important role in facilitating play opportunities.

The survey underpinning this research was inspired by the 2005 report, *School Grounds in Scotland*, which sought evidence on attitudes towards the use of Scottish school grounds in order to inform national debate on how to target resources more effectively, support new initiatives and establish best practice in Scottish education (McKendrick, 2005). It questioned whether enough was being done to raise awareness and understanding of the potential value of school grounds as a curriculum resource and challenged existing barriers. As Australian schools address the challenge of play-based learning in their curriculum, they may look to the playground as a place of possibilities. This research study is an effort to assist schools by providing data that can inform policy-makers, raise awareness, challenge barriers and encourage the exploration of new approaches to the provision of play opportunities.

In Australia, federal, state and territory governments have acknowledged that children in the early years of life mostly learn what they need to know through play experiences. A national Early Years Learning Framework was introduced in 2009 and has a play-based focus and each state and territory has built upon this to develop individual curriculum frameworks (retrieved from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/early-years-learning-framework>). The introduction of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) in 2011, applicable to students up to eight years of age, means that Victorian primary schools are now required to address play-based learning in their curriculum design (retrieved from http://www.education.vic.gov.au/early_learning/eylfdf).

The education system in Australia

School education is compulsory in Australia for children between the ages of 6 and 17 years, with some small variations outside those basic requirements between states and territories (retrieved from <http://www.acara.edu.au>). At a federal level, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations oversees education in all Australian schools by setting education goals and developing strategies. Schooling in Australia starts with a kindergarten or preparatory year followed by 12 years of primary and secondary school. States and territories have the primary responsibility for funding and directing state government schools (retrieved from <http://www.deewr.gov.au>). In Victoria, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2009) provides services to children and young people both directly through government schools and indirectly through regulation and funding of early childhood services and non-government schools (retrieved from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au>). In 2010, government schools in Australia numbered 6357 primary schools, 1409 secondary schools, 1286 combined primary/secondary schools and 416 special schools. Excluding special schools, 70% of schools were primary, 16% were secondary and 14% were combined primary/secondary schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Aims of this research

The main aim of this research study was to investigate a large sample of primary school playgrounds which could provide information currently unavailable to researchers conducting smaller case studies. Searching for the email addresses of government primary schools in Victoria resulted in 1595, although these were not all 'stand alone' primary schools, some being part of larger schools including secondary education on the same campus. Just under a quarter of schools responded; probably those with an interest in their playgrounds, this voluntary self-selection needs to be born in mind when considering the results. The survey was structured to answer the following questions for individual schools during analysis to compare and contrast results in the light of local and international researches.

Key research questions

- (1) What are the physical features of playgrounds in the sample schools including sporting facilities, fixed and loose equipment, surfaces, shading and natural features?
- (2) When and by whom are these playgrounds used?
- (3) How is playground policy formulated and enforced in schools?
- (4) How is play viewed by teachers in each school? What types of learning do teachers believe occur in the playground while children play?
- (5) In what ways is the playground used as a teaching resource by teachers?
- (6) What developments have occurred in playgrounds in the last year, in the last five years? How have these been funded and maintained?
- (7) What problems are identified by schools that relate to the playground?

The survey

The survey consisted of 43 questions. Considering the time constraints school principals operate under, yes/no and multiple choice options were given and there was also provision for detailed responses. Questions were grouped under the following headings:

About your school.
 Characteristics of the playground.
 Playground rules and supervision.
 The playground as a teaching resource.
 Playground improvements.
 Problems with the playground.

Methodology

I chose an email survey for data collection, having seen that this method provided all necessary data for the Scotland School Grounds report. Using an online survey instrument was an efficient and inexpensive option compared to using postal services and printed material. Having gained approval from RMIT University Higher Degrees and Research Ethics Committee and the Victorian DEECD to conduct this survey, 1595 emails were sent with a link to the survey instrument which allowed for anonymity. The Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that many primary schools are not 'stand alone', suggesting that they may use more than one email address. Approximately 100 emails were not delivered. The survey remained open for six weeks and 350 principals or their nominees participated and a large amount of data, both qualitative and quantitative, was collected. The option for a written response linked to the 20 multiple choice questions was used by all respondents. Interestingly, many participants identified themselves clearly in their responses.

Findings

This study documents a large number of schools where the playground is a valued resource with much potential for children's play and fun. The survey respondents have demonstrated their interest in their playground by the detail they were willing to give in their responses. The respondents are evenly split by location: rural 50.2% and urban 49.8%; student enrolment: 52% more than 200 students and 48% fewer than 200 students; and age of school: 59% built more than 50 years ago and the others built more recently with 6.2% less than 10 years old. Findings are listed in relation to the key research questions.

What are the physical features of playgrounds in the sample schools including sporting facilities, fixed and loose equipment, surfaces, shading and natural features?

In 55.2% of schools, playground area has been lost to new classrooms over recent years; however, 78.9% of the total number of respondents believe that the size of the playground is adequate.

59.1% cater for wheelchair access in their playgrounds although it is not clear from data what this means exactly. 93.2% of schools have sandpits and 30.0% have digging patches. 94.4% have grassed areas for play, 71.5% have food gardens and 52.3% have areas set aside for recycling food scraps and other suitable waste products for composting.

In 56.7% of schools, there are bushy areas where children can play and 17.0% allow children to climb trees. 16.7% of schools have ponds and water features, but it is unknown whether children have access to these. 13.0% have a weather station, 11.0% a wildflower area, 9.9% a nature trail, 13.6% a bird box /table and 19.2% wildlife habitats in the playground. (It is uncertain exactly what schools mean by the term 'wildlife'.)

Unsurprisingly, 96.3 have fixed play equipment, 75.9% paint playground markings for games, 62.2% have a sports equipment shed for children to access at recess times and 74.6% have

sheltered areas with seating. 90.0% of schools have asphalt areas, 75.8% have concrete areas, grassed areas are found in 91.3% of schools and artificial turf is found in 37.0% of playgrounds. There are dirt surfaces in 69.6% of schools and gravel surfacing in 50.6%. It is not known what percentage of playground area is dirt or grass. In 88.5% of schools, the main source of shade is trees. 81.1% of schools have shade sails and 52.9% have structures such as pergolas for shade.

Most respondents took advantage of the short answer option when asked about playground features unique to their school. This resulted in a wide range of descriptions including the following:

Our sandpit is shaded with 100-year old oak trees.
 Bush setting, a place where kids can make cubbies.
 Steep hill at the back of the school that students like to roll down.
 Veggie garden, animal enclosures, native bushland.
 Huge grounds, three different types of play equipment areas, two sandpits, cricket nets, fitness equipment, large number of four square courts, access to wetlands at the back of the school.
 Large outdoor learning and passive play area including an amphitheatre, tiered sandpit, dry river bed and low line bridges.
 Lots of open space, treed spaces, oval playground structures incorporated into a natural setting.
 Native bushland area, outdoor classroom (under construction) in partnership with local environmental interest group.
 Three areas of equipment with solid roof cover, park like sloping areas, adjacent parklands suitable for sports and games.
 Frog pond wetlands area, rubberised fitness track, amphitheatre.
 Forrest area where children build forts, cubbies, racing tracks, barricades, etc. in a free play environment.
 A kitchen garden, hothouse and chook shed.
 Dry creek bed in native vegetation, waterfall with gravel, rocks, reeds, bridges and forts.
 Environmental centre and aviary. Hens and a stone patch that catches water.
 Bushland setting. Lots of open space, hundreds of places for children to run, play, climb and use their imagination in a creative way.
 We have a wind turbine in the playground.
 Huge sandpit, sloping areas, lots of space for creative play among vegetation.

Out-of-bounds areas

When asked to describe 'out-of-bounds' areas, most did. The responses fell into two main categories: those not easily supervised and those thought to be physically dangerous. Some examples are as follows:

Some areas are out of bounds because they are not easily supervised.
 Area close to busy road where supervision is difficult.
 Embankment areas of high gradients.
 Near state park especially when very hot due to likelihood of snakes.
 Drains and any area that becomes excessively wet.
 Unmaintained oval area – uneven rough surface with wild grass.
 Car park areas – too dangerous.
 Bushes and behind shelter sheds where they cannot be seen by teachers.
 Area where we collect broken limbs, branches, etc.
 Nature reserve.
 The fence lines are encouraged to be kept clear. This ensures students are not able to communicate with anyone outside the fence line.
 Rubbish bin area – fenced enclosure housing small metal bin on wheels and small plastic paper recycling bin emptied once per week – possible to get trapped and squashed by them.
 Near water tanks as it is hard to supervise.

Not allowed in area known as the tunnels as there are old pieces of adventure playground which need to be removed as well as a lot of gum trees which have been dropping their branches. Far end of school oval (to avoid issues with neighbours – balls, fence noise, etc.). We discourage children from playing in areas close to fence lines due to lack of visibility and likelihood of snakes and spiders entering from farmland. Any long grass during summer due to snakes. In trees, damage to trees and no soft fall beneath.

When and by whom is the playground used?

In over 95% of schools, the playground is played in by children before school, during morning and afternoon recess breaks, lunchtime and after school. 55.4% of schools have afternoon recess break during which children play outside. Out of school hours (OSH) programmes are available in 59% of schools and often during these times children play outside in the playground. 29.6% of schools report sharing their playground with community groups during school hours and 81.9% of schools make their playground available to the local community on weekends and after school.

How is playground policy formulated and enforced in schools?

90.9% of schools indicate that they have playground rules, whereas 9.0% interestingly do not. 82.8% arrive at these rules through a consultative process between teachers, parents and students. Schools also rely on the principal, the teachers and the teacher on yard duty to create rules when they believe it is necessary. In 93.7% of schools, the rules are changed after consultation with children and teachers and the reason for this consultation is most likely to be after an accident or injury in the playground (62.0%), when requested by children (34.0%), when requested by teachers (45.0%) or when requested by parents (33.3%).

In 98.4% of schools, all teachers and staff are required to undertake playground supervision, mostly in equal amounts. 97.5% of schools have a teacher on duty before and after school. They predominantly view their role as policing playground rules. When children break playground rules the consequence is always to stop their play. They are required to either walk around the playground with the teacher on duty, sit in a designated place for a period of time or in 53.4% of schools they may be sent indoors.

How is play viewed by teachers in each school? What types of learning do teachers believe occurs in the playground while children play?

In 72.3% of schools, teachers discuss the playground as a learning place and in 27.7% of schools they do not. When asked how teachers would describe the learning that occurs in the playground, 88.9% listed social skills, 80.2% said environmental understandings, 89.2% fitness, 95.7% sport skills and 96.6% said physical development. No schools mentioned the word 'play' in their responses to this section.

In what ways is the playground used as a teaching resource by teachers?

In 99.4% of schools, teachers conduct formal lessons in the playground. The following general areas were described: physical education, sport, maths, science, geography, environmental education, art and dance. More specific lessons were also listed: music, bike education, reading, real life learning such as measurement, creative play and gardening.

In other schools, the playground is viewed as an extension of the classroom.

Teachers often take children outdoors for classes across all curriculum areas,
Our aim is to make our playground an extension of the classroom,
All teachers are encouraged to use our many outdoor learning spaces.

What developments have occurred in playgrounds in the last year, in the last five years? How have these been funded and maintained?

When asked if there had been developments in the playground during the previous year, 52.9% said yes and 47.1% said no. Improvements specifically described included upgrades of fixed play equipment, relocations of fixed equipment and creation of natural places such as wetlands, vegetable gardens, indigenous plantings and bush areas. Many schools mentioned adding areas of synthetic turf, new seating and additional shade sails.

When asked about funding sources for playground improvements, 87.0% of schools said fundraising by the school community, 68.9% government grants and 30.5% community grants. Planning playground improvements was undertaken in collaboration with the local community in 81.0% of schools and in 24.7% of schools a landscape architect was employed. Not one response mentioned input from students.

What problems are identified by schools that relate to the playground?

The most common problem schools describe is maintenance, with 85.6% listing this first. Poor quality surfacing in 45.8% of schools and litter in 40.1% were the next most problematic areas for schools. Vandalism is a concern in 37.8% of schools, but it is not possible to tell whether this is more common in urban schools or rural schools. 9.7% of schools described bullying as a problem in their playgrounds. Accidents are described as a concern in 18.7% of schools, with 76.2% also saying that child safety is not a major concern in their playground.

Discussion

Neither location, socio-economic status nor the age of a school were significant factors in any of the areas under scrutiny in this study. It is reasonable to expect that schools located in rural areas are more likely to have natural features such as trees, dirt, grass and rocks in their playgrounds, but this was not the case. Urban schools described a wide array of natural features in their playgrounds as frequently as respondents located in rural areas. Moreover, whether or not the school was built within the last 10 years did not impact on the type of playground. This is surprising given that new schools are likely to include the playground as part of the initial plan, whereas in earlier years, playgrounds were an afterthought, built within the spaces surrounding school buildings. From the earliest days of schools in Victoria, the spaces around school buildings were used for practical purposes such as containing horses ridden to school, housing a woodpile for fires in the classroom, outdoor classrooms where formal lessons were held, and formal and regimented physical education classes. Playgrounds, although they existed in the early schools in Australia, were not created with the specific purpose of places for free play until the 1960s (Chancellor, 2007).

The importance of recess breaks in the school day

Anthony Pellegrini and David Bjorkland write with much concern about the attack upon recess breaks in schools in the UK and USA (Pellegrini & Bjorkland, 1996). Pellegrini explains,

'breaks during the school day, like breaks from work on the factory assemble lines, have existed for nearly as long as each of those institutions has existed' (Pellegrini, 2008). Joe Frost believes

If historical and research evidence for children's play, playgrounds and recess were taken seriously by adults, threats to their existence would soon be over. History and a century of scholarly research say that play is essential for healthy development. We must have playgrounds, free outdoor play and recess because they matter, for children's health, for their development and for their future. (Frost, 2008, p. 156)

Olga Jarret concludes in her article investigating research in school playgrounds that, among other things, more research is needed to determine facts upon which further studies can build, such as the percentage of schools that have abolished recess (Jarrett, 2002). For the 350 schools who participated in this survey, recess is part of the school day. All respondents indicated that they have a morning recess break and a lunch time break and 55.4% have an afternoon recess when children play outside. For nearly every survey respondent, the playground is used before and after school as well on weekends.

Teachers' perceptions of the importance of play in the school playground

Following the implementation of the VEYLDF in 2011 for children from birth to eight years, teachers are now seeking ways of addressing learning through play. It is timely to remember the comments of Brian Sutton-Smith: 'Even those who have announced recently that they are in favour of children's rights to play usually wish to organise it in some way and not leave it to nature . . . ' (Sutton-Smith in Pellegrini, 1995, pp. 279–280). As Pellegrini and Smith note, recess is the time when children have freedom to choose what they do and with whom they can play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). Peter Smith comments that the more adult structuring of play there is, the more we get away from true play, and the more scope there is for manipulating activities in the interests of adults. 'We should bear in mind that children enjoy and probably get benefits from the kinds of play that adults do not prefer' (Smith, 2010, p. 197). He points out, 'there remain today a range of views on play: from the belief that it is vital for development, through to its being a useful discharge of excess energy' (Smith, 2010, p. 22).

In my previous research (Chancellor, 2007), I found that teachers listed the benefits of recess in two ways, either harking back to Spencer's surplus energy theory (Spencer, 1896 [1855]) or valuing it for social development in line with Slukin's descriptions (Slukin, 1981). In this study, results show that the majority of teachers describe the playground as a learning place with physical and social skills very highly rated. Teachers also describe the playground as a place for formal lessons, but they do not make direct links between play and children's learning or well-being. Interestingly, respondents describe environmental understandings as an important aspect of recess time and schools have created playgrounds with many natural features to facilitate this.

It is important that recess is not reduced to a time for promotion of adult directed activity aimed at reducing child obesity levels, as suggested in the 'Move It Groove It' project reported in Australia in 2001 (Zask, van Beurden, Barnett, Brooks, & Dietrich, 2001). Such approaches are based on an assumption that children will increase their activity levels if adults intervene. In nearly all schools in this study (89.2%), physical fitness is described as a consequence of recess breaks. When schools provide high-quality playgrounds that promote play, children engage in a lot of physical activity spontaneously. Peter Smith notes that physical activity play has been relatively neglected in the research literature and by the educators, but we know that

children spend a lot of time in running around, jumping, climbing, skipping and play fighting – often just for fun (Smith, 2010, p. 99). A UK study by Bob Hughes and Max Mueller demonstrates that increased physical activity occurs in children's play when playspaces and fixed equipment are able to be modified (Hughes & Mueller in Jambour & Van Gils, 2007, Ch. 10). In Australia, considerable resources are spent on fixed equipment in school playgrounds that is not designed for deliberate modifications by either children or adults. However, when this is complemented with loose natural materials for play, teachers describe physical fitness as an outcome.

Underpinning the UK playwork practice is a body of rich and ongoing practitioner research about play and how to foster it (Hughes, 2001). Common Threads project, *Playtime! 2* (2011), which focuses on putting play back into the school playground, has provided evidence that adults who understand children's play will make a huge difference to the learning occurring in school playgrounds (retrieved from www.commonthreads.org.uk). This programme demonstrates the opportunities for children to creatively solve problems, practice negotiation skills, challenge themselves, collaborate on projects, learn to assess risk and persist to achieve their goals, are skills that can be learned and practised during play experiences in the playground. The potential for increasing play opportunities for children through educating teachers is also the conclusion of American play researcher Joe L. Frost, who believes that teachers who are responsible for play supervision today would benefit greatly from play leadership training as was once a practice in the USA. He reflects on the growth of play leader training programmes that grew out of the European adventure playground movement but over recent years have disappeared (Frost, 2008). Australia currently has no formal play leadership training for primary teachers and the responses to this survey demonstrate that teachers understand the importance of the playground and recess breaks, but have limited understanding of the play that is occurring.

Connecting with the natural world

While David Kushner reminds us that children will play, despite their circumstances (Kushner, 2012), play opportunities can be enhanced by providing high-quality play environments such as those described by Sharon Danks, where the existing single purpose designs are replaced with aesthetically beautiful, ecological school grounds (Danks, 2010). The benefits children gain from connecting with the natural world are well documented. In this survey, 80.2% of teachers describe the playground as a place where children gain environmental understanding. Nicholson states that in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly related and proportional to the availability of loose objects, e.g. stones, sticks, leaves or pipes which children can manipulate in their play (Nicholson, 1971). When opening the new Maidens Park Primary School nature-based playground, Western Australian Education Minister Dr Elizabeth Constable explained the importance of outdoor play in the natural environment to children's learning (retrieved from <http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/WACabinetMinisters>).

Respondents to the survey describe a range of natural features in their playgrounds, yet previous research has shown that in many schools in Australia, children do not have the opportunity to play in natural environments with loose parts and playground rules often focus on stopping children climbing trees, exploring bushy areas and playing with loose natural materials such as sand, dirt, stones and sticks (Chancellor, 2007). A strong focus on preventing injury is not always balanced against the benefits provided by child-directed play. Schools sometimes remain influenced by outdated government directives such as a Playground Supervision of Students in the 1997 Schools Bulletin No. 668 that warns teachers to beware of unsafe activities in the playground including games with sticks (retrieved from <http://www.det.act.gov.au>). Yet respondents to this survey indicate that in 76.2% of schools, safety is not a major concern.

While this seems a contradiction about what matters to teachers from the survey, when asked to specifically comment on priorities, safety concerns did not rate highly. Naturally teachers are concerned that children are safe in the playground and in 76.2% of schools surveyed, they consider the playground to be a safe place even though children are playing with loose natural materials.

Involving children in the design process has the potential for playgrounds that meet their needs. In Australia, there are documented examples such as Maiden Park Primary School in Western Australia where traditional play areas were re-designed for nature-inspired play so that students can climb trees and rocks safely, make cubbies in forest areas, plant native trees and dig in sand. The principal describes a year-long planning and consultation process involving a landscape architect, parents, students and staff. He describes the key to success as student involvement (retrieved from <http://www.natureplaywa.org.au/maiden-park-primary-school>). In another example, researchers describe children's participation in the Patch Primary School project and the Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne (Rayner, Rayner, & Laidlaw, 2010). Both projects sought design outcomes through a collaborative process with children with great success, and, the Patch primary school describes the on-going process itself as more important than the outcomes. While the survey shows that large numbers of schools value natural features in their playgrounds, no respondents described children as being involved in the design process. The collaborations described above may provide examples for schools with an interest in further developing their playgrounds to incorporate natural features.

In Australia, there is a spectrum of quality in relation to primary school playgrounds directly related to the importance placed on children's play at recess. Some schools invest in play equipment, landscape architects, gardeners, maintenance staff, loose materials, pets, vegetable gardens, orchards, creek beds and recycling areas, while others focus all resource investment indoors. Occasionally, the schools create playground features, such as frog ponds and native gardens, and then forbid children access to these (Chancellor, 2007). Generally, investment in the playground can lead to opportunities for children to learn as they play, be physically active during their play, make links with the natural world and improve their overall well-being. With government initiatives placing the spotlight on play in the early years of school, this survey illustrates a variety of features that schools have developed in their playgrounds which may be a useful resource to schools looking for ideas.

Playground rules

Elizabeth Wood points out that any attempts by adults to manage and control children's play will always be problematic (Wood, 2012). Common Threads Project Playtime 2 notes that when playgrounds have features where children can play in a range of ways, problems associated with bullying and other undesirable behaviour diminish and in most cases completely vanish (retrieved from www.commonthreads.org.uk). This view is supported by Peter Smith, who writes that an interesting playground environment and good playground supervision can greatly reduce the incidence of bullying (Smith, 2010). Given that 96.5% of respondents said bullying is not a problem and 76.2% said accidents were not a concern, it would be interesting to investigate further to find if schools believe that close surveillance is preventing accidents and bullying or if there are other reasons, such as the provision of natural playspaces with loose parts for play and opportunities to play in a range of ways.

Some discrepancy occurs around questions about the formation of playground rules when comparing this and previous research. While 51.8% of schools in this survey say that they have formal playground rules and 71.8% say that these rules are created via a consultative process involving teachers and children, previous research suggests that rules are frequently

created and altered in response to situations the teacher in the playground encounters (Chancellor, 2007). Further investigation is needed to explore the various ways playground rules are formed and altered.

Teacher attitudes to the playground supervision

In Australia, playground supervision is undertaken by teachers rather than by ancillary staff. The survey showed that 88.2% of teachers in the schools who responded are rostered on yard duty. Evans found that yard duty was something many Australian teachers disliked (Evans, 2003). Responses to this survey show that in 69.4% of schools, teachers enjoy being in the playground and gather there for lunch or coffee when not on yard duty. This is the same percentage of schools with tables and chairs for parents to spend time in inviting places for both adults and children. In the survey schools, 88.5% have trees for shade, 74.6% have sheltered areas with seating and 74% have flower gardens. This has implications for the allocation of resources to playground development, suggesting that the benefits will not only be felt by students, but also parents and teachers.

Schools are an integral part of communities and in this survey, respondents describe the range of ways school playgrounds provides a forum for local community engagement as well as a valuable resource used on weekends and OSH. In 81.9% of schools, the community shares use of the playground on weekends for a range of activities such as sporting events, free play and fundraising. 30.5% of schools reported that community grants fund their school playground improvements and in 81.0% of schools, playground improvements are planned collaboratively with the local community.

Conclusions

This survey provides a picture of playgrounds in a large number of government primary schools in Victoria, Australia. It shows that the physical features, both natural and constructed, indicate teachers' understanding of the value of free play and the playground appear limited and investigate how schools formulate and enforce playground rules. It also reveals that many playgrounds are local community resources, used by OSH by community groups who assist with maintenance and fundraising for those playgrounds. This survey suggests that high-quality playgrounds are equally common in rural and urban areas and in small and large schools. Socio-economic factors do not appear to be significant in the provision of high-quality playgrounds. The importance of recess breaks in the school day remains strong in the schools surveyed and in over half of these schools, children have an afternoon recess break in addition to the morning and lunchtime breaks. The respondents are schools where the playground is valued, and there are many examples of natural playspaces where children are encouraged to engage in free play.

Generally, it is adults who plan developments in school playgrounds, often via a school council or a subcommittee and unfortunately, children's voices are not often heard in the planning process. While previous Australian case studies have shown that it is important to actively involve children in the design of their playspaces, few schools do so. For schools planning to develop their playgrounds, the information in this survey could be a useful resource. Ideas are showcased that could become triggers for change, with more schools promoting the learning that occurs outdoors and working with their local community to develop playgrounds that are places for play to be enjoyed not only by children and teachers, but also by the local community.

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Notes on contributor

Barbara Chancellor is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at RMIT University. Her research interests include children's play in outdoor settings and the impact of design and adult supervision on play opportunities.

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