The importance of play

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All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. It's a well-known proverb. The wisdom underpinning the proverb, that if Jack works all the time he will be both boring and bored, seems forgotten in some schools in the United States. Depending on the school Jack attends, Jack may not have the chance to play.

Faced with increased school accountability, student testing programs, more demanding curriculum and government sanctions for poor performance, many schools have deleted recess from the timetable – those breaks in the school day set aside for active, free play. The apparent belief is that the time is better spent in the classroom (with an added advantage of reducing the risk of lawsuits associated with playground safety and security). According to recent surveys, the minutes allotted to recess have shrunk in 40 per cent of school districts, and some newly built elementary schools are not even being provided with playgrounds (Schachter, 2005).

This move has not been without its critics. Recess – unstructured playtime where children have a choice of activities – can contribute significantly to the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of young children. Play is seen to improve children's cognitive skills, language skills, ability to focus on learning and social and emotional development, through allowing children to practise lifeskills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, sharing and problem solving (Steinhagen & Iltus, 2004; Clements, 2001; NAECDS/SDE, 2001; Jambor, 1999).

The physical benefits of unstructured outdoor play are also seen as unique, encouraging physical activity in ways unable to be duplicated by the provision of physical education as part of the curriculum (Council on Physical Education for Children, 2001; Sindelar, 2004).

For adolescents, recess also has worth. Chillman (2003) highlights that while 'stranger danger' has led to public spaces being less frequently accessed by young children, access to external environments is also diminishing for teenagers due to negative adult perceptions about their presence. As a consequence, school grounds are becoming even more significant to young adults as an outdoor space for recreation and socialisation that is solely or primarily for their use.

However, even if Jack does attend a school offering recess, it is not a foregone conclusion that he will benefit. What children do, or learn, during recess can be positive and productive, or negative and counter-productive. The experience will be strongly influenced by the playground itself, as the type, quality and diversity of children's play activities is directly influenced by the type, quality and diversity of children's play environments (Moore, Goltsman & Iacofano, 1992).

A study undertaken by Barbour (1999) showed how a playground design emphasising exercise favoured children with high physical competence, resulting in children with low physical competence being 'constrained by their reluctance or inability to participate'. Susa and Benedict (1994) investigated whether more pretend play (which is positively correlated with creativity), would occur on contemporary designed playgrounds (based on modular equipment with multipurpose linked structures) rather than on traditional playgrounds (containing swings, slides and the like) and found the type of playground did influence children's creativity. Titman's 1994 research indicated that poorly designed and maintained school yards actually lower children's self-esteem. Conflict or withdrawal have also been shown to be more likely when children are crowded together and equipment and materials are limited, and, even if sufficient space exists, insufficient equipment limits options for children, leading to boredom and aggression (Malone & Tranter, 2003).

Such findings were reinforced in the secondary school environment in another study by Titman (1999), who found that when seating was inadequate or non-existent, the scarcity of this most popular feature in the school grounds led to territorial domination by older pupils. In contrast, when school grounds were considered to be interesting and full of a variety of spaces, the intensity of play and the range of play behaviours increased, providing opportunities to develop important lessons on cooperation, ownership, belonging, respect and responsibility (Moore & Wong, 1997).

Collectively, these studies, and others like them, raise a host of issues about children and playgrounds. They lead to a key question – what should the playground that Jack uses at school be like? Research would suggest that 'good' school playgrounds, that is grounds that support physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, have three common characteristics. They support *developmentally-appropriate* activities for the physical, social, emotional and cognitive developmental range of the children that use the space – whether they are young children or older young adults. They exhibit *diversity* in the types of spaces provided and the range of activities supported. And, perhaps the most critical feature, the types of spaces provided and activities supported in school grounds are *interesting* to the user (see points below). If a type of space or equipment is not liked by the children – irrespective of whether it has been well-designed – it will not be used.

For all these features to come together in a school playground, considerable planning and associated resources are required, involving educators, landscape architects, the school community and the users – the children. Traditionally this has not occurred. While schools expend significant resources on planning to ensure spaces support the formal curriculum (primarily the built environment), less commonly does the outdoor 'informal learning' environment receive a similar focus of attention. This is changing, however. In the United Kingdom, through advocacy and research by such organisations as *Learning through Landscapes*, which funded Titman's seminal research on the effect of the physical environment of school grounds on children's behaviour and attitudes, and by government and private support being provided to schools to improve school grounds (eg Growing Schools Programme). Similar initiatives are also occurring in parts of Canada

and the United States (eg Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative, Seattle's Grey to Green Program, and Peaceful Playground Program).

School grounds are being increasingly recognised as an integral and valued component of the learning environment. As more research is undertaken perhaps, in time, the school yard will be seen as a place where the formal education curriculum can be supported alongside equally-valued informal learning experiences that occur in the playground environment. When this happens, the notion of cancelling recess in order to devote more time to the formal curriculum may not be considered as a serious or viable option. Then, if Jack is dull, it will be because Jack chooses to just work, rather than Jack not having the chance to choose whether to work or play.

School grounds: what children look for ...

Four elements that children look for in school grounds have been identified:

- *A place for doing*, which offers opportunities for physical activities, for 'doing' all kinds of things, and which recognises their need to extend themselves, develop new skills, to find challenges and to take risks.
- *A place for thinking*, which provides intellectual stimulation, things which they could discover and study and learn about, by themselves and with friends, and which allows them to explore and discover and understand more about the world they live in.
- *A place for feeling*, which presents colour, beauty and interest, which engenders a sense of ownership and pride and belonging, in which they can be small without feeling vulnerable, where they can care for the place and people in it and feel cared for themselves.
- *A place for being*, which allows them to 'be' themselves, which recognises their individuality, their need to have a private persona in a public place, for privacy, for being alone with friends, for being quiet outside of the noisy classroom, for being a child. (Titman (1994) *Learning through Landscapes*, p 58)

What makes a fun place for children?

Titman (1994) identified seven 'flags':

- A natural landscape with trees, flowers and other things that grow;
- Animals, ponds and other livings things;
- Natural colour, diversity and change;
- Surfaces which they can use which don't hurt;
- Places and features to sit in, on under, lean against where they can find shelter and shade;
- A landscape that provides different levels and 'nooks and crannies' where they can make dens and find privacy;

- Structures, equipment and materials that can be changed, actually or in their imagination. (Titman (1994) *Learning through Landscapes*, pp 58–59)

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