

Preface

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

For individual schools the OPAL Programme comprises over 6 days of meetings spread over one year. The process starts with a structured audit carried out by the mentor and the school together. The audit covers 18 critical cultural and environmental conditions which affect the quality of children's play. This is followed by an INSET day which informs the whole-school community of the Programme and brings together their agreed values and principles to form a play policy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

links
to
learning

School
&
friendships

Play
as a
Right

Personalisation
for
St. Michael's

EYFS
&
outdoor
play

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

(Fisher and others, 2008).

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

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

(OPAL Adviser's notes, p.2).

Overview of the OPAL Programme

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

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

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

Playground design

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

Imaginative
&
Creative
Play

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

Evidence
of
Impact

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

Saving
Costs

- Spaces should contain a range of malleable materials which is non-specific, 'ordinary' and 'polymorphic' (eg sand, mud, sticks) for use by children, rather than 'commercially' designed play products which are often overburdened with adult prescription (see, for example, Nicholson, 1971; Moore, 1986; Powell, 2007). Bundy and others' (2009) study of the introduction of loose parts into a primary school playground clearly establishes the impact on children's play patterns, noting the increase in more physically active play, not only in terms of aerobic exercise (running, jumping) but also in resistive activity (pushing, lifting, carrying, rolling materials around the playground). Their research notes:

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

Polymorphic
materials