

No time left for escaping?

Diane Rich has found that the serious business of play is being squeezed out by the demands of an over-structured and hectic timetable for children

The Foundation Stage in England is underpinned by play, which hopefully will mean that reception-aged children get plenty of opportunities to engage in play.

But play in schools should not be limited to foundation stage children. While working as a consultant with a school to review its play policy, I talked with some Year 2/3 children and was told that there isn't really much time for it.

"Class is all lessons. We have subjects and we work hard but we have a morning playtime, only some people have to finish their work, so not everyone always gets out. We have a lunch break but we have to eat our lunch during that... and there are lunchtime clubs you can go to instead of playing out, so on Monday I go to chess club, on Wednesday I go to French club and Thursday it's learn-to-draw club. Then after school you can go to homework club. And after that I have swimming on a Monday, piano on a Wednesday, karate on a Thursday. On Saturday I have football and sometimes there are matches on Sunday, too. I get time to play on my GameBoy in the car."

In years to come, childhood memories of play may well be reduced to recollections of GameBoys, PlayStations, computer games and playing videos. The highly timetabled and structured world of many children does not allow much time in either home or school lives for play in which children are free to make choices, to be creative, to test out theories and ideas and to be in control of their actions, play-themes and storylines.

Play which involves working alongside others, sharing, negotiating, tolerating, compromising, empathising with and respecting others is inhibited. Where can such play be found in schools beyond the reception class?

I found the beginnings of some on the fringes of a London primary school's designated playtime football area. I was tracking one child's experiences in school

over a period of time. This observation was during the 2002 World Cup football tournament, hype about a Harry Potter film, and a pending war in Iraq. World events combined with children's interests and experiences, their concerns and anxieties and their preferred kinaesthetic mode of play.

The group of Year 2/3 boys huddled together, planning teams for an England versus America game. Everyone wanted to be on the England team so there were start-up team allocation problems until Jagdip made an announcement.

Jagdip: "The USA team is not really the USA team at all. They have been holed up hiding in a cave in Afghanistan for safety!"

Simon: "Ha! No-one will get them there!"

Rupesh: "Why are they hiding?"

Jagdip: "Because of Voldemort. He wants to take over the muggle world when it's the England-America game. He knows that all muggles like the World Cup... and so the America team are from Hogwarts really... transfigured!"

Peter: "... Yes. To save the muggles!"

Jagdip: "They are a magic team, but no-one knows."

Teams shifted fast. No one minded being on the non-England team now. The playing was set for glorious action but the signal for the end of playtime was given and the children dispersed. Peter, a Hogwarts team player, told me "It was a great match, but I'm really knackered now!"

Throughout the planning and story-making he had stood in a defender's posture, gently moving from side to side, nodding and agreeing with the emerging scenario. There was clearly a lot more to his posturing than I knew. Had he just wrestled with a few Dementors? Fought off a few Death Eaters? Perhaps come face-to-face with Voldemort himself? Or had he prevented Beckham or Owen from scoring a spectacular goal? His exhaustion hinted that he had.

Is school playtime the only opportunity

Children in schools have a right to play and to have their play highly valued?

that many children have to play in this imaginative way? From the accounts of busy children's lives this seems to be so. Therefore it is time to urgently address:

- the importance of play for all children in schools;
- its important contribution to children's learning and sense of well-being;
- how much time there is for it;
- the value and status placed on play in schools;
- how it can be seen to be valued and promoted by all those who work in schools.

As a response, all schools should be actively upholding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children have the right to play. Consequently, all children in schools have a right to play and to have their play highly valued. This should underpin any school's play policy.

It will mean giving time and space for children's play, providing flexible resources and having respectful adults at all levels with understanding of the value and purpose of children's play. It requires managers who support ongoing staff development in this area.

Walt Disney famously linked doing the fantastic with experience of the real. You cannot achieve the former without the latter. Schools, of course, play an important role in expanding children's experience of the real. But children need more opportunities to make sense of the real they encounter, through doing the fantastic in their play. They need opportunities to play, which gives them a chance to work out answers to their own life-threatening problems such as: "What would happen if Voldemort tried to take over the muggle world?"

Doing the fantastic is a potential all playing children have. It needs to be given time, space and status in all schools. ☛

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