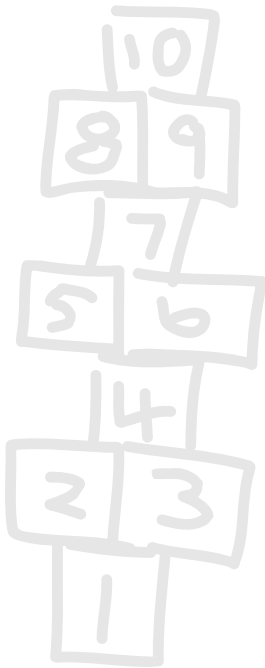




Transforming primary school playtimes



"This school is different from others I've worked in. Being on playground duty is a pleasure here!" *Supply teacher*

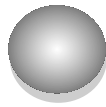
IT WAS WHEN this comment was made to a visitor that staff and pupils at St Mary's C of E Primary and Nursery School knew that their playground strategies were working.

Two years ago, as in many primary schools, St Mary's small playground was dominated by football and characterised by children either rushing around wildly or huddling in small groups around the edges.

Many publications have been written about developing school grounds to enhance both the formal and informal curriculum. St Mary's have worked hard to develop their very small grounds in an interesting way and now have, for example, several areas for growing things and for encouraging wildlife. This leaflet, however, focuses specifically on how they have set about improving the daily experience of playtimes.

"Even the most imaginative child will find it difficult to be creative and sociable in a bleak, sterile space for a quarter of every school day. At best, such spaces are breeding grounds for boredom and unhappiness. At worst they may actually cause hostility, bullying and an ethos of 'survival of the fittest!'" *Wendy Titman, Play, Playtime and Playgrounds*





What's this got to do with Education for Sustainable Development?

Skills

- co-operative working
- critical thinking
- negotiation
- problem solving
- reasoned debate
- informed decision-making
- creativity – an ability to envision alternatives
- research and data handling.

Values and attitudes

- empathy and awareness of the points of view of others
- an understanding of the place of individual and collective rights and responsibilities
- a desire to participate
- a belief that working with others, they can make a difference.

Establishing a caring ethos

The first goal for the new headteacher was the development of a caring ethos which would extend into the playground.

Assemblies

The staff began continual reinforcement of the caring ethos through school assemblies. Bible stories about Joseph are used as a basis to explore the experiences of refugees and other outsiders and this is related to how new children in school might feel. After hearing the story of 'The Harvest Mouse', the children are asked to consider the actions they take unthinkingly which will affect other people's lives. Real life stories are told of people who have shared their expertise and knowledge with others. Thoughts and ideas engendered by these stories are then related directly to playtimes.

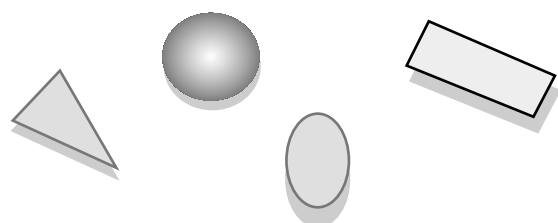
The 'good buddy' system

An overcrowded playground with large bodies hurtling around it can be a particularly threatening place for the new Reception child. Year 6 teachers talk to their classes in September about how this would feel, and ask the older children to act as 'buddies' to any new children who need it.

They discuss the kinds of things they can do to help. Their 'enabling' role is stressed, so that they help the younger children to develop skills rather than doing things for them or treating them as toys.

The Year 6 children play a key role in encouraging social interaction between the newcomers and initiating a greater variety of play activities. Playground markings can be used for hopscotch, snakes and ladders, etc. but new children need to be taught how to use them, and how to play all the other games that can give purpose to playtimes. Those at a loose end need to be integrated into games with others.

The buddy system is particularly important when there is a new intake. Once new children have developed friendships and have got used to the hurly burly of the playground, the need for input from the older children gradually dwindles until their only role is to keep an eye out for any problems that may arise.



The small area outside the nursery classroom has large toys, a gardening area, and access to a dressing up box. It was decided that small groups of Reception children should be allowed to use this area on a rota system at playtimes, to provide some continuity for the children as they move into Reception and to make full use of the equipment. The Year 6 children put their names on a rota to help in this area too.

"The children used to hate leaving the nursery playground and the nursery toys. They didn't know what to do in the big playground. Now the Year 6 children teach them what to do. They have a calming influence." *Teacher*



"When they fall over we help them get up and sometimes when they're crying for their mum you can make them feel more comfortable." *Pupil*

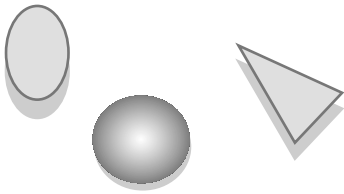
"Research suggests that segregation by age may remove the need to 'take care of little ones' and increase the degree of aggressive play amongst older ones... The opportunity to mix with those of a different age, to learn to take account of their needs, and to pass on games and skills is a positive and valuable part of the Informal Curriculum."

*Wendy Titman,
Play, Playtime and
Playgrounds*

An action research approach to a practical problem

Although an improved ethos made some difference to the success of playtimes, the issue of children using the time most effectively to develop both social and physical skills remained. Playground markings provided alternatives to football, but were not enough. Staff felt that there should be a variety of equipment so that children had the option to play individually, in pairs, or in small or large groups, depending on their needs and how they felt on a particular day.

Each class was given a box of games equipment to use. It wasn't a success. Equipment got lost and broken, things were not going back in the right boxes and there wasn't enough equipment left for PE lessons.



Year 3 tackle the problem!

As part of a topic on the local area, the Year 3 teacher asked her class if there was anything in particular in the local area that they thought wasn't working, that they would like to do something about. The immediate answer was "school playtimes"!

The class used an action research approach to resolving the problem. First they had to define exactly what the problem was that they wanted to tackle. They brainstormed all the things they didn't like and the key issue seemed to be that there wasn't enough to do because games were not looked after and were not replaced and this led to behavioural problems.

Their action research question became:

"How can we make sure that games are looked after and can be replaced when they are worn out?"

We've identified the problem, now to find a solution

Year 3 decided that they had to devise a sustainable, self-financing approach, but that it would have to start with good equipment that people would want to look after. First they went through all the equipment and got rid of the broken and damaged things. They then went to talk to the Headteacher, who agreed to find the money to make up two boxes of interesting, good equipment.

How would they fund replacements after that? They decided to charge for the loan of equipment. This raised more questions:

- How much should we charge?
- How can we collect the money?
- How will we know who has what?
- How can we make sure the equipment comes back?

After much discussion, they came up with a plan which was publicised in *St Mary's Chronicle*, the monthly newsletter which is read by children, parents and staff, being full of interesting information, children's work, personal messages, games and competitions. Year 3 also presented their plan in an assembly so that other children could ask questions about how it would work.



"Those quickest to the box got the best things. Children were diving on the box. There was no co-operation. There was no sense of ownership. They didn't feel that it was theirs so there was no incentive to look after it. In consequence, there was not enough to do because as the boxes of games were used up, there was no money to replace them." *Teacher*

Trialling, evaluating and improving

Planning a solution was only the beginning of the action research process. The idea was trialled for half a term and problems were identified and resolved. The next big question was, "How can we speed up the process so that everyone has time to play with the equipment they have paid for?" At first, both boxes were kept together, so there was a big crowd around them. The solution – to put them on different sides of the playground. Classes were given different times when they could use the equipment to avoid long queues. Initially equipment prices varied. This proved to be another time waster and now everything costs 1p. A daily rota for looking after the boxes was discarded after trialling in favour of a weekly rota so that the children had an opportunity to improve with practice. Another problem identified was that infants were at first buying bats that were too big for them to use. The solution – separate Infant and Junior boxes with equipment sorted according to size and appropriateness to the age of the children.

A questionnaire that Year 3 carried out at the end of the trial period to establish whether the system was working and whether the rest of the school wished it to continue was met with an overwhelming "Yes"!

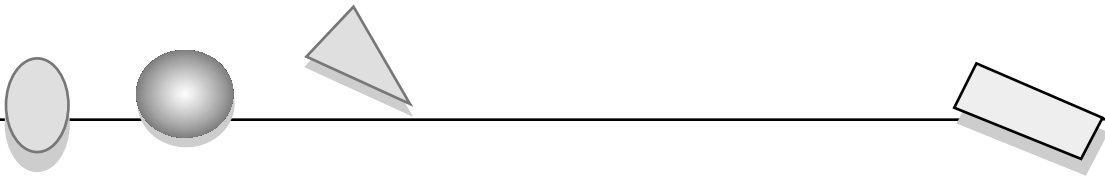
"There's been a 95% improvement in playtimes. Now you can stand and talk to a group of children because you're not spending all your time on control." *Teacher*

An Action Research Approach

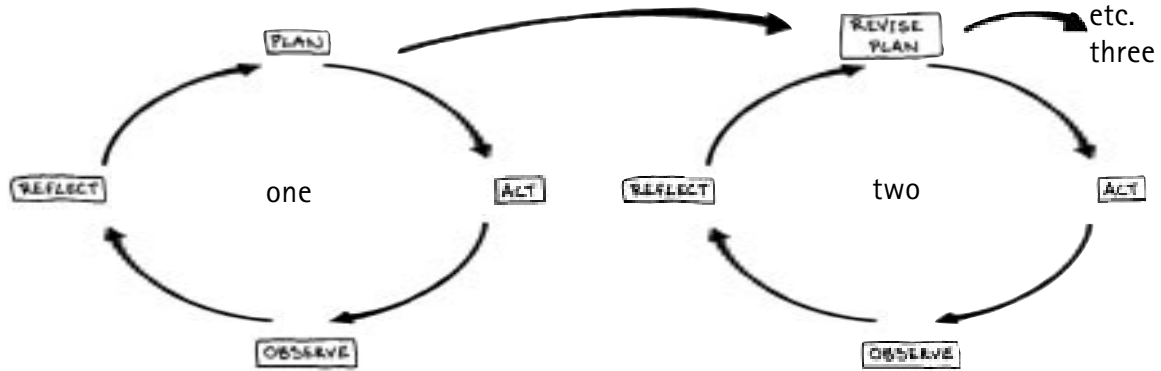
- 1 **Define exactly what the problem is.**
Turn your problem into a question:
"How can we...?"
- 2 **Make an action plan that you think will answer your question. Decide exactly what you want to do. List what steps you will have to take to make it happen.**
Decide who will do them and by when.
- 3 **Trial your plan and watch what happens.**
- 4 **Evaluate. Identify any problem areas.**
- 5 **Repeat steps 1-5 until the problem is fully resolved!**

"In the light of experience, I would advise another school to start small. Concentrate first on one playtime, trial it, and then when it is working well it can be extended to lunchtimes."

Teacher



The traditional spiral of action research cycles



"I like the way **A process of education**

that now we've got playtime games, there are more team games. Now if you break up with one friend, you've got lots of other people to play with."

The more cumbersome aspects of monitoring the equipment have become unnecessary as all the children in the school have got used to the idea, like it, and help to make it work. At first, Year 3 children recorded the names of who took what. It took a long time, but they thought it was necessary so that children could be held accountable for anything they lost or broke. A term later, they stopped recording names as all the children were looking after the equipment. If anything goes out of the playground or gets broken by accident, the children responsible immediately tell a teacher so that it can be retrieved or mended.

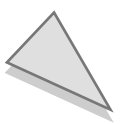
At first, some children would pay their penny for a piece of equipment and then walk around clutching it all playtime. They soon realised that it was only fun if they invited others to play with them!

The Headteacher stresses, however, that the improvement in looking after playground equipment is only part of an ongoing process. Care for equipment is constantly reinforced by the teachers in the classroom demonstrating that they value even small resources such as drawing pins and felt tips as well as the big expensive things.

Pupil

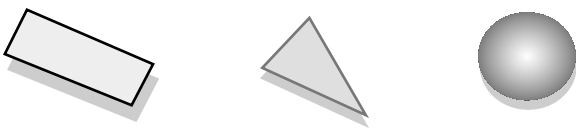
What can we do with all this money?

Having started with good equipment, which everyone was looking after, £40 rapidly accumulated and nothing needed replacing. The whole school was asked what they would like to do with the money. Additional equipment was bought, more boxes established, and the scheme was extended to lunchtimes. When a new piece of equipment arrives, it is introduced to the children in an assembly and different ways of using it are discussed. All the children now feel ownership of the process. More classes are getting involved with looking after boxes in different parts of the playground – for example the Year 2s look after the infant boxes.



The development of physical and social skills

Teachers are noticing marked improvements in the children's hand/eye co-ordination. The children are setting themselves goals, for example increasing the number of times they can bat a ball or shuttlecock without dropping it. Pupils are becoming more creative about finding different ways of using the equipment and this is extending into developing and inventing other play opportunities. A giant draughts game was bought with some of the money and has proved very popular. Now, however, children sometimes don't bother with the draughts pieces and instead use people on the squares in a giant human draughts game! Gender distinctions are becoming blurred as the equipment is always around; for example, some of the boys are becoming very skilled players of cats cradle and skipping games, whilst the girls are playing basketball.



Involving the whole school community

Teaching staff worked hard to find a solution, but it was when the children themselves took on the problem that the solutions really began to work. Regular information in the *St Mary's Chronicle* ensured that parents understood the decisions and the reasons behind them. Year 3 children (now Year 4) are keeping a watching eye on the overall organisation of the scheme, but ownership has effectively been extended to all the pupils through assemblies, the sharing of responsibilities and the school council.

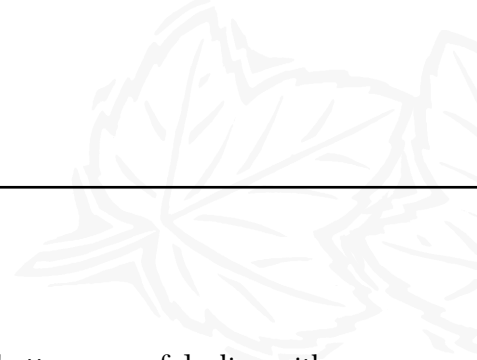
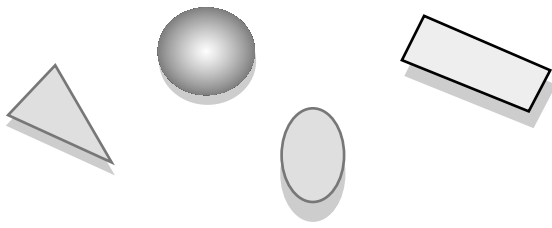
The role of the school council

The school council representatives act as a conduit for the ideas of their classmates and there is a post box in which children can put ideas or problems for the council members to raise. This system has contributed to the development of playtimes in ways which work for the children. On school council recommendation, a corner of the playground near the building has been designated for quiet games only and picnic tables have been installed. It is used most in the summer for drawing, reading and talking.

Last summer diary writing, sharing of photograph albums and playing card games became popular.

The idea of providing basket ball hoops at different heights for different sized children has been suggested and the council are exploring the idea of organising an Easter egg treasure hunt as a way of raising money to buy them.

The school council also raised the issue of footballs going into the nursery area or being kicked into the road. In an assembly, they warned the rest of the school that they would implement a system of fines if it continued. It hasn't. The council members have found an even better way to ensure that the rule about the ball not going above a certain height is kept: "We just keep teasing them and telling them that they're a rubbish football player if it keeps going over shoulder height - they can't keep control of the ball!"
School Council member



Involving lunchtime supervisors

Crucial though their role is, lunchtime supervisors are often the last people to hear about playground initiatives decided on by teaching staff and children and are rarely involved in decision making. St Mary's set up a monthly meeting for half an hour before lunchtime to involve supervisors in the process of improving playtimes. Initially, staff were often late and lacked commitment to the discussions. Recognition of the value of the contribution of lunchtime staff was given when the school decided to pay them for the extra time. This has raised the status of the meeting and of the staff involved.

The staff have used the *OPTIS Guide to Lunchtime Supervision* as a springboard for discussion. They read through case studies of situations that have got

out of hand and discuss better ways of dealing with them.

The school has a system of certificates and awards which are given out during Friday assemblies. Lunchtime supervisors are encouraged to award certificates for particular acts of kindness or helpfulness in the playground. This both gives additional status to lunchtime supervisors and emphasises that appropriate playground behaviour is valued as much as what happens in the classroom.

Key factors in successful playtimes

- **Involve the children in making decisions so that they feel ownership of the outcomes.**
- **Give pupils real responsibility for making their decisions work.**
- **Employ an action research approach so that children (and adults) are enabled to try out ideas and learn from their mistakes.**
- **Ensure that parents are kept informed of reasons for changes in practice.**
- **Publicly value non-teaching staff by involving them in decision making and paying them for extra time involved.**
- **Use assemblies and staff as role models to constantly reinforce the values you wish to encourage in the pupils.**
- **Be creative! Each school is different and exploring alternative solutions to a problem is an integral part of education for sustainability.**



Reference

Play, Playtime and Playgrounds, Wendy Titman, WWF/Learning Through Landscapes, 1992

OPTIS Guide to Lunchtime Supervision, Manchester Open Learning

Acknowledgements

Written by Gillian Symons, based on the experience of St Mary's C of E Primary and Nursery School, Droylsden, Manchester

Published by WWF-UK, Panda House, Weyside Park, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR.

© WWF-UK. 1999.

