Hey teachers- leave us kids alone? Can Playtimes be enjoyable for all?

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Abstract

Playtimes in English primary schools are a perennial and mainly enjoyable event. They are, however, largely overlooked in educational reform and have experienced 'benign neglect'. The paper presents the findings from a research project which investigated the playtimes of primary school children. Questionnaire data gathered by pre-service teachers focused on children's views of playtimes, including the role of adults, and the children's use of playground space. Whilst generally positive about their playtimes, a minority of pupils find playtimes challenging. Pupils recognise the complexity and challenge of the social expectations of playtimes. This paper proposes that perhaps the time is right now to focus anew on playtimes to consider whether change should take place, why and how this change might be effected.

Playtimes, children's views, socialisation, intervention, wellbeing.

c. 8500 words

Introduction

Primary school pupils in England spend between 21% – 24% of their school day outside of their classroom engaged in morning and lunchtime play (Blatchford and Baines, 2006). However, in contrast to the remaining time spent in school playtimes have received relatively little focused attention either in terms of policy or research. This is in contrast to the relentless scrutiny and amendment afforded to the remaining 75-80% of a child's school day (Ball, 2017).

This paper explores this inconsistency arguing that there may have been benefits of 'benign neglect' of playtimes for the majority of pupils who enjoy this aspect of the school day. However, it may be that now, in light of our concerns about the mental health of young people with over half of mental health problems emerging by age 14 (Kessler et al, 2005) and the links between peer relationships, developed in part through playtime opportunities, and future adult psychological health (Sakyi et al 2015), is an appropriate time to look again at this aspect of the school day. My intention in this paper is, first, to present an overview of the context of English playtimes and, second, to use primary data to explore children's views of playtimes, their perceptions of the role of adults at playtimes and how children use space. I will use this data as a starting point to discuss whether, why and how playtimes might be changed.

The structure of the paper begins with an overview of broad changes in primary education in England and then presents a synopsis of previous research into playtimes and returns again to the English context with a summary of current policy.

Background context

It is uncontested that within the English education system significant changes have been made to the curriculum, assessment and school governance over the last 30 years (Ball, 2017). The curriculum has been the focus of numerous reviews beginning with the National Curriculum in 1988 and its subsequent modifications in 1994, 1998, 2001, 2006, 2014. The teaching of reading and mathematics to young children was subject to particularly relentless and prescriptive demands (Rose 2006) and beyond. Such was the pace of change through the late 1990s to mid-2000s that the term 'initiativitis' was introduced by school leaders to refer to a situation where teachers were implementing a new curriculum whilst also responding to a

number of policy changes (PricewaterhouseCoopers/Department for Education andScience, 2007).

Revised forms of assessment include the introduction of widespread national statutory testing of English, maths and science in the early 1990s, the integration of research-based formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998) into school practice and the continuance of numerous changes in assessment (Alexander, 2010) up to and including 2017 (Department for Education).

Additional major changes have taken place as a result of the marketisation of schools and latterly the differing forms of governance established have all contributed to an education system which has been under close scrutiny for almost three decades. However, despite these extensive and rapid changes to school life there is one aspect of a child's school day that has remained largely unnoticed and largely immune to the broader nationally mandated changes that have taken place - playtime.

There have been periods when pockets of interest has been paid to playtimes in England; for example, the work of the Opies in the 1950s to 1980s focusing on the lore and language of childhood and playground games and its continuance in the work of Grugeon (1999, 2005). In the 1980s and 1990s into the early 2000s the joint work of Blatchford (England) and Pellegrini (USA) focused on the role of playtime in the social development of children (Blatchford, 1989 and Blatchford, Baines and Pellegrini, (2003). In the 2000s this interest in the social aspects of playtime has continued in the Anglophone world (Doll, Murphy and Song, 2003, McNamara et al, 2015).

The value of playtimes to children is not universally accepted and indeed there may be a sense that children's play is under attack (Wood, 2014). Various arguments are put forward to reduce, or, in the case of some states in the US, to eliminate playtimes. These include the need to increase instructional time to raise standards, to reduce the poor behaviour of a small minority and to increase the physical activity of children by replacing playtimes with Physical Education (see Bohn-Gettler and Pellegrini {2014} for an overview). In common with other nations the pressure on schools in England to improve academic outcomes has been used as a justification for shortening playtimes (Blatchford and Sumpner, 1998, Blatchford and Baines, 2006). Berliner (2011; 291) researching in the USA says of reducing hours for recess that 'under pressure from high stakes testing educators make decisions that reflect compromised ethics, if not a complete loss of their humanity'. Beresin (2016) also argues that time for play in the US is seen as expendable and may be used for enrichment or removed as a punishment. McNamara et al (2015) highlight the cumulative effects of daily recess on children's physical, academic, social and emotional trajectories and reiterate how the social and emotional needs of children are too often under-estimated and traded for instructional time.

Other areas of research into school playtimes have been directed towards the 'scholarisation' of childhood (Mayall, 2000) harnessing free time for their perceived physical health benefits and the drive against childhood obesity (Green, Reilly & Hargrove, 2012). This has led, for example, to some schools replacing break time with PE or other physical activity. Research has also centred on the physical environment (Christidou et al, 2013) as part of the wider interest in the physical spaces where children and young people learn (e.g. Woolner, 2015; Sigurðardóttir & Hjartarson, 2011). The Forest School movement in England has also

influenced both the physical environment and the potential learning opportunities available to children.

The relative lack of policy interest in playtimes is demonstrated within both initial teacher education and post-qualification where it is not mandatory for teachers to learn about this 20-25% of the school day. Any input provided is a decision made at local level by the teacher education courses designed to accredit new teachers (DfE, 2012) and the employing schools. School playgrounds are subject to guidelines related to safety and use as part of wider legislation but the detail of supervision ratios, activities allowed, time allocated and the spaces available are very fluid and are largely at the discretion of the school in consultation with governors and key stakeholders. There is an interesting anomaly between the relative freedoms around playtimes and the means by which school are held to account through Ofsted's inspection process. Previously the Handbook for Inspection (Ofsted, 2015) made only one oblique reference to playtimes; 'behaviour both in classrooms *and around the school*, in accordance with the school's behaviour policy' (my italics). However, the impact of playtimes, which includes the organisation, safety, inclusion and the behaviour of children within and after this time can have serious implications for the judgments made about the quality of education provided. The most recent framework for school inspection (Ofsted, 2018) includes more explicit reference to lunchtimes and playtimes particularly within the area of personal development, behaviour and welfare.

Whilst there has been no national mandated focus on playtimes over the last 30 years, in 2005, as part of the Primary National Strategy, training materials 'Playtimes and Lunchtimes' (DfES) were made available within a bank of training focused on pupil behaviour and attendance. There is, however, no data on the uptake of these resources nor any published

evaluation of their impact. Thomson (2007; 55) argues that, rather than playtime neglect, 'staff (particularly head-teachers) were very concerned with the minutiae of playtime and the plethora of concerns that surrounded its management'.

Whilst playtimes *per se* have not had much direct attention, playgrounds have been refurbished although largely on a local and ad hoc basis. The influence of the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (DfES, 2007) has seen a drive to use outdoor space as a site for academic learning and this has had some impact on the development of playground space in primary schools. There has also been some indirect attention through the introduction of mandatory anti-bullying policies in schools (DfE, 2014). There is also some work carried out by play specialist consultancies, such as OPAL, (Outdoor play and learning) but their input is not mandatory and is dependent on individual school finances.

The barriers to children's play outside of school are well documented in the UK and other parts of the world; urban environments, over-organised and over-protected lives, lack of safe places to play and the increased use of electronic media leading to the conclusion by Chancellor (2013; 64) that 'For children without backyards or access to local parks, their only chance to play together outside is likely to be at recess breaks in schools.' One consequence of Chancellor's insight is that schools can be regarded as having an increasingly important role in facilitating outdoor play opportunities. One could argue that, within the English context, there may have been advantages to children of this relative lack of attention to playtimes as they may have avoided some of the prescription experienced in the remainder of the school day.

The children's voice in playtime research, where it is sought and heard, is clear; children value school playtimes and their playgrounds (Blatchford and Sumpner, 1998, Blatchford and Baines, 2006; Mulryan-Kane, 2014). Despite the encroachments on both time for play (Beresin 2016, Berliner, 2011) and space for play at school (BBC, 2012) children want to retain their playtimes, and wish to have input into how playtimes are managed.

The research reviewed leads us to explore the pupils' views of playtimes and the interactions with their perceptions of the roles adults perform and how children use space. We will use this data to discuss whether, why and how playtimes might be changed. The paper focuses on the English context with its particular cultural mores focused on surveillance and safety. We acknowledge that these perspectives differ both within and across Europe and to the wider Anglophone nations of the US, Canada and Australasia.

Methodology

The research was carried out in First (ages 4-8) and Primary schools (ages 4-11) in the North East of England. The data was gathered by pre-service teachers who were completing their 38-week Masters level course which led to a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The impetus for the research arose from the contrast between the views of children that playtimes are clearly important to them and largely enjoyable (Darmody, Smyth and Doherty, 2010, Blatchford and Baines, 2006, Evans, 1996) and the evidence that this aspect of schooling is overlooked by education policy makers and researchers. As we work in a setting where the education of pre-service teachers is a major focus, we sought to explore the above paradox using their experiences on practicum. Our expectation were that playtimes may not be a key priority for the pre-service teachers' mentors due to the academic pressures schools face. Further reasons might relate to the

relative absence in initial teacher education of recent research on child development and, in particular, insights into the social and emotional aspects of primary teaching (Murray and Passy, 2014).

The tasks set were designed to provide the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to reflect upon playtimes: the perceptions of key stakeholders; the organisation and rules, and the interface between their detailed knowledge of one setting and one group of children and, through key readings, the wider research in this area. Their aim was to provide a broad understanding of playtimes and playgrounds that would be shared in a taught discussion, post-placement. A range of tasks were devised to effect the aims above which included a pupil questionnaire, informal observations of morning and lunchtime play using an observation schedule developed by the author, discussions with the class teachers about the purpose and organisation of playtimes and the completion of a playground plan. The schools were informed about the purpose of the playground tasks as part of their role working in partnership with the University to support the pre-service teachers in achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS, 2012). Prior to any placement pre-service teachers were reminded of their ethical responsibilities within the school setting and, in particular, were given guidance on requesting pupil participation in the questionnaire and their obligations to report concerns that might arise from the responses. The research was conducted using mixed methods; the quantitative questionnaire within which qualitative descriptive data was embedded (Leech, and Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The focus for this article will centre on the responses to the questionnaire which were used to seek the views and experiences of the school children. Questionnaires were prepared for the Key Stage 1 (5-7 year old) and Key Stage 2 (7-11 year old) pupils. Both versions included

ordinal scales for children to rate their general feelings about morning playtimes and lunchtime playtimes and their most recently experienced morning or lunchtime playtime. Pre-service teachers were asked to distribute the individual questionnaires to their whole class with the explanation to the children that they wanted to understand more about playtime in their school. Data was gathered from 119 Key Stage 1 pupils (aged 5 to 7) and 351 Key Stage 2 pupils (aged 7 to 11). This data was collected from the pupils by pre-service teachers on their first assessed paired-placement and on their final solo placement.

As part of the questionnaire children were asked to write down the things they liked most and least about playtime and to record the activities carried out in the most recent play period. Pre-service teachers scribed for children where necessary. The questionnaires were further developed between the pre-service teachers' first and final school placement to include a specific request for the older (7-11 year old) Key Stage 2 pupils' opinions on the playground space using a Plus, Minus, Interesting enquiry (see findings for further details of the task).

The role of pre-service teachers as researchers is important in this work as these are individuals who may not be seen by the children to have the same status or power as the class teacher (Fraser et al 2004). They are also both insiders and outsiders to the research process. They have the advantages as insiders as they are familiar to the children and thus less noticed and they also have some contextual knowledge and so possess a more nuanced understanding of behaviours than an outsider. For our research we adhered to the views expressed by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) who argue that some kind of personal involvement, in this case as an aspiring class teacher, can be both useful as well as a potential liability.

The pre-service teachers, however, are also 'outsiders' to the research as they are transient and, whilst they have some knowledge of individuals and the particular school context, they do not have potentially long-held allegiances to the school's practice nor, potentially, fixed opinions about specific children. They are, as a result, in a potentially very interesting position in relation to the children and this may have important consequences for the responses given to the questionnaires.

Findings

A number of mandatory tasks were set for each practicum and pre-service teachers and school staff adopted agency in choosing which tasks were completed. Those tasks associated with graded assessment of pre-service teachers were generally afforded higher precedence whilst other decisions on task-completion related to the priorities set by the school, individual mentors and pre-service teachers. The questionnaire data reported is from a convenience sample of pre-service teachers and constitutes approximately 30% (7/ 23) of classrooms for the first practicum and 26% (12/46 classrooms) for the third. The range of ages and school represented in the responses reflects the University-school partnership comprising children from year 1 through to year 6 in schools that could be described as rural, inner-city or suburban.

How playtime is viewed by children

For both age groups, playtime in the morning and at lunchtime is enjoyed by the majority. The mainly positive views of playtimes in general are similar to responses for the most recently experienced playtime. The older children are somewhat more likely to opt for the less effusive 'OK' responses, as can be seen in table 1.

(Table 1 near here)

Overall most children are broadly positive about both morning and lunchtime play, younger ones are slightly less positive about lunchtimes with 26% preferring to stay in as compared to 19% of the older children.

Alongside the majority who enjoy morning playtime, there is, however, a minority of children in both KS1 (8/119, 6.7%) and KS2 (12/351, 3.4%) who have a distinctly more negative view (hate or don't like) when asked about this aspect of the school day. Interestingly these negative views increase when the children reflect on their most recent morning playtime (to 10% and 9% respectively). Of the forty pre-service teachers in the study approximately thirty noted that a minority of children, one in each class of between 20 – 30 pupils, regularly struggled socially with playtime. An analysis of the responses given by the minority of pupils who 'hate' or 'don't like' playtime revealed that these were quite specific to each child at KS1, whereas KS2 pupils (3) allude to social problems such as bullying, name calling or fights.

The rather larger group of children who would prefer to stay in at lunchtime (31 KS1 pupils {26%} and 67 KS2 pupils {19%}) similarly gave a range of reasons, including a number relating specifically to lunchtime problems of "waiting to eat" and getting a "sore stomach from eating then running". More overlap with the experience of morning playtime was seen in the dislike some have of "being outside", and mention of social issues (e.g. "being alone"; "bullies"; "falling out with people"). For those KS2 children who gave neutral to negative responses to morning playtimes 19% made reference to negative social issues and this was echoed for lunchtime play (18% of pupils). Interestingly further exploration of the responses

given by the children who were positive about morning and lunchtime play revealed many of the same social concerns, suggesting that the social problems of playtime are not restricted to the minority who explicitly dislike it.

Gendered activities at playtime

Further investigation was undertaken of girls' and boys' views about playtimes at KS2. These comments were made in response to the question '*What one thing do you like best about playtimes?'* These responses were coded by the author using a thematic approach which drew on background knowledge of children's playtime activities and behaviours; for example, a child's reference to climbing was coded as a 'physical' response. A social coding was given when children made reference to playing with or talking to or being with friends i.e. where the social motivation appeared to override the specific activity. Physical activity was coded as such when pupils made direct reference to , for example football or running around and was also inferred through reference to particular items of equipment e.g. 'bouncy hopper', 'climbing frame'. From the 351 children who began the questionnaire 264 provided an answer to this question (135, girls and 129, boys). Some comments were difficult to code with certainty and so were ascribed 'other' leaving 100 of the girls' and 98 of the boys' replies set out in table 2.

(Table 2 near here)

For the girls 74% of the coded responses made reference to social events and for boys this figure was 44%. Overall 59% of the responses referred to social aspects as the one best thing demonstrating the centrality of this aspect of playtime. 44% of the boys' coded responses made reference to physical activity compared to 14% of the girls.

The role of adults

In English primary schools there are differences and overlaps in the adults who supervise children at play and lunchtimes. At morning or afternoon playtimes the supervision is carried out by teaching assistants (who work with teachers in the classroom at other points in the day) and teachers (although there are schools where teachers rarely or never supervise playtimes). At lunchtimes the supervision is provided by 'lunchtime assistants' most of whom are employed just for this brief role (although some are also teaching assistants); teachers are not required to supervise lunchtimes, although the Head Teacher or other members of the Senior Leadership team may be present.

Key Stage 2 pupils were asked to provide their views of the role of different adults using the question 'what do you think the two most important things the adults who look after you at playtime should do?' The same question was asked with reference to lunchtime play. The questions were then followed by a selection of possible choices and the option of an 'other' category. Results of 'the single most important' thing are presented.

(Table 3 near here)

Original order of options preserved.

This question was the penultimate of 15 questions presented and was answered by between 74% and 70% of pupils for the playtime and lunchtime environment respectively. For the morning break and lunchtime 82% and 76% respectively of the children expressed the view that the adult role is to keep them safe (this was the first role offered in a list of possible roles). This is unsurprising in an English context where there are a number of 'norms' around

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children's safety and well-being; for example, staff wear photo-card lanyards and visitors to the school are signed in, posters provide information about informal pastoral assistance for children and schools advertise their involvement in a number of initiatives designed to protect children such as 'Operation Encompass' (HMIFRS, 2011) designed to support children who have witnessed domestic violence. Interestingly the major role of 'keep them safe' appears somewhat at odds with the low numbers who cite 'prevent bad behaviour' or 'punish people'; this might be an artefact of the order of options and the 'keeping them safe' choice is perceived by children to incorporate these later factors.

Beyond the strongly stated 'safety' role, children perceived that adults should promote social behaviours evidenced through reference to 'help children who don't have friends to make friends' (second most cited role) and 'encourage us to play together' (the third most frequently chosen). This data supported the view the children did seem to have a sense that playtime could be a challenging time socially both for specific individuals ('help children who don't have friends to make friends') and more generally ('encourage us to play together'). These findings resonate with the earlier finding that children, whether they broadly enjoyed playtimes or were part of the small minority who did not, recognised the social challenges of playtimes. The children did not expect that the adults to be their playmates.

Our results reveal that children perceived few differences in the roles of play and lunchtime staff despite their different positions within the school; they are overwhelmingly positive in nature with very few references to a punishment role (see table 4 above). However, comments from the KS2 pupils who responded to the 'Plus, Minus, Interesting' (PMI) enquiry used to explore views of playground space in the revised questionnaire, present a

more complex view of the adult role. The prompt question was: 'Please think about your **playground space** (and that includes any equipment, grassed areas/ benches fixed to the ground) and tell us something that is **a good thing**, something you **don't like** and something that is **interesting**. Tell us **why** you think those things.' Of the 173 Key Stage 2 children who responded to 'something I don't like (and why) fourteen made references to rules, for example 'most things are banned which are fun' or '(we are) not allowed in certain places'. These responses referred either overtly to the actual behaviours by staff at playtime or in response to decisions made that impacted on the use of space. Thus, for example, children were frustrated about lack of access to certain spaces due to weather conditions or imposed rotas.

What children do at playtime: use of school space by KS2 pupils (PMI enquiry).

60% of pupils responded to the plus aspect of the enquiry, 51% to the minus and 45% to the interesting aspect. The responses to the PMI combine with the stated best and worst aspects of playtime to convey a sense of playtime as a vigorous, active outdoor experience combined with a somewhat difficult social situation to be navigated, yet also enjoyed. Many responses to the PMI united references to aspects of the space with opinions about use; some children told us only about activities, leaving us to infer their ideas about the physical space.

There were 111 and 98 responses from girls and boys respectively (a 60% response rate). Approximately 40% of these respondents provided a reason for their choice using explicit "because", "so" or "and" responses. Where reasons were provided, most were broadly in the category of 'fun'/ favourite activity/ being with friends.

(Table 4 near here)

There are few differences by gender in the number of comments related to general space and equipment or to physical play; there is a minor difference in reference to green space. Our girls and boys both want to be physically active at playtimes (the main category of response for both genders). There is, however, a notable difference in the activities they pursue, with football being much more popular among the boys whereas the climbing frame is popular with both genders which is supported by additional references to climbing/ adventure type equipment such as monkey bars and ropes.

The central theme coming across here is the variety of spaces and activities a balance of provision for those who enjoy physical activity alongside the quiet areas and places to talk to friends. This is an aspect of playground culture that has been changing in more recent years. This suggests the school's overall strategy for playtime is a diversity of provision, so that different children at different times can occupy themselves appropriately.

In summary the salient themes that emerge from the findings relate to the centrality of the social side of playtimes. This is mainly presented as a valued and enjoyable element by the majority, but also invoked as part of the negative side, through references to bullying or friendship issues (that were made less frequently by those with more and less positive views of playtime). Alongside this there is recognition of the role of adults in 'keeping them safe' and to a lesser extent in supporting social encounters (and the complexity of the interaction between the social aspects of playtime, the adult role and the play space available).

Discussion

The article began by proposing that the relative 'benign neglect' of playtimes may have been beneficial to the majority of children who enjoy this aspect of the school day. Do our findings

instead suggest a need to focus anew on playtimes? The discussion summarises the main findings in relation to the three questions which explore children's overall perceptions of playtime, the role of adults and then the playground space. It then considers, in the light of this data, whether, why and how playtimes might be changed. However the first consideration is to offer a range of caveats in relation to the research methods employed and the possible link to the findings.

Research with children can potentially pose some ethical challenges. Within our context we were asking pupils to evaluate a system that they were already embedded within and would remain within. One of the key ethical issues relevant for this research were the power structures both hidden and not so hidden (Powell et al, 2012) that children are subject to and expectations of compliance in their role in contributing to school life out Valentine (1999) . Thus one could argue that if children did have ideas about the changes needed to playtimes conducting the research using school-based staff in a school setting may not enable these ideas to emerge.

The degree of ownership of the research and engagement by the pupils was not explicit i.e. pupils were not contributing their ideas with a view to actually changing their playtime but rather as a means of informing another adult, a far more of a transactional arrangement. Furthermore there is limited use of a participatory approach (Clark, 2010). The tools used to explore the research questions are also open to critique. So, for example, whilst pupils were invited to reflect on the system they currently experienced they were not explicitly offered alternative scenarios which may indeed have offered possibilities for new ways of conducting playtimes. They did, however, present different ideas which would indicate their understanding of possible implications of the questions. The use of writing within the tasks

would have disadvantaged some students who struggle to write, are disinclined to do so or unable to write quickly. Alternative approaches to understanding the lived experiences of young children including, for example, the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2010) would have afforded a richer understanding of the many ways in which, particularly younger pupils can come to represent their worlds.

However, whilst conscious of the potential limitations of the research process, the conclusion from our research and that of others (Blatchford and Baines, 2006, McNamara, 2015) is that for a majority of children playtimes are a positive, enjoyable feature of their school day. For a small minority, however, playtimes can prove difficult; over a quarter of KS1 pupils and almost a fifth at KS2 wanted an inside alternative to the perennial event of outdoor play at lunchtime. Our research also highlighted that children recognise the social challenges of playtimes, whether they largely enjoy the experience or not. They demonstrate an awareness of the complexity and challenge of the social expectations of playtimes which is echoed in their view of the adult role, acknowledging their most important role to assure safety and then recognising their potential for supporting social interaction between children, both for those that were somehow vulnerable and more generally. However, KS2 children expressed some negative views about the impact of adult behaviours at playtimes and the challenges created by playtime rules. There is a concern from research by Thomson (2007) and from discussion with the pre-service teachers cited that some of the rules and restrictions on children's playtimes might arise from issues of convenience, routine or systems which have not benefited from the participation of pupils.

Findings into children's perception of their play space revealed that they notice the range of spaces available to them and boys and girls at KS2 value space that enables physical play and

opportunities for social interaction. The activities children undertake are affected by the design and the organisation of the space available which might then have consequences for the interactions that can then take place. Thus, for example, the presence of climbing frames was viewed positively by both girls and boys, in a way that provision for football was not.

What then do we take from these and other findings in a context where the basic format of playtime is largely unproblematic for most children and it is not a priority for action? Should we indeed do anything? Our findings would tend to be supportive of focused attention being given to playtimes as they indicate the differing degrees of challenge playtimes present to pupils. These range from the needs of the small proportion of children who find playtimes difficult; to individuals who recognise the social challenge of playtime whilst positive about their own experiences; to a wider group who would like an alternative especially to outdoor lunchtime play. Having concluded that change is desirable the consideration then turns to issues of why and how change might be realised.

Why might we seek to change playtimes?

If we accept that playtimes play a crucial role in the development of social relationships for all children (Chancellor, 2013) it would seem pertinent to at least consider whether there were any changes that might benefit the development of those relationships? The links between the value of playtimes in the socialisation process and the development of friendships (Sutton-Smith, 1982, Blatchford, Baines and Pellegrini 2003, Blatchford and Baines, 2010) and the protective value of friendships to a child's later mental health are well-documented (Sakyi et al., 2015). These interconnections and the very current concerns about children's mental health (The Children's Society, 2018) serve to explain why we might now want to pay more overt attention to this aspect of the school day. Indeed McNamara (2015;

64) warns that 'for children with limited or ineffective social skills the daily cumulative impact of recess on mental health may be significant'. The recognition by the survey children of the social challenges of playtime supports this link.

Challenges of effecting change?

The issue of *how* we might effect change in playtimes to enable the development of children's socialisation is problematic for a number of reasons that are particular to our focus (a wider discussion of the challenges of school change per se is not the aim of this article). These can be framed as: school playtime as the domain of children; the knowledge and skills of adults in relation to children's play and the history of other well-intentioned interventions on school life.

First, playtimes are both the difficulty for some children, highlighting challenges they face and at least partially the vehicle by which necessary peer social skills might be developed. Second, playtimes are a very particular context where their distinctive nature to children is acknowledged and so the tension with adult 'interference' is even more problematic (Lester and Russell, 2008). We recognise that playtimes are one of the few times that children can interact in a space free from surveillance and open to choice, autonomy and creativity (Pellegrini and Smith, 1993). There is a concern that adults may not 'understand' the children's culture or context of playtime and thus may prevent or inappropriately influence the social and emotional learning that can take place by allowing children to play independently. Pellegrini and Kato (2002) emphasise the importance of balance between organised and unstructured activity whereas Bishop and Curtis (2001) question the value of a 'socialised recess' model where adults provide structured, monitored activities. The responses

of our children to the role of adults question suggests that they do not expect or want adult 'interference' in this way.

A further challenge to intervention in playtimes is the conflict between teachers' surface recognition of the potential of playtime as a vehicle for the development of children's social skills and the attendant knowledge of teachers with regard to those areas of development. Murray and Passy (2014; 499) in their review of initial teacher education over the previous 40 years recognise that whilst 'ideas of care and nurture running deeply through their (primary teachers) practice' there has been a reduction in knowledge on child development on current courses. Whether and how we intervene in playtimes may call for greater understanding by teachers (and other adults present) both about children's social and emotional development and their own role in supporting this.

A challenge arises then from the tension between, at one level, the view of children as experts on their playtimes where we might indeed think to cede some control. This stance is counterbalanced by our knowledge about children's social and emotional development, the possibilities to harness playtimes to cultivate that growth and the potential risk associated by missing or misdirecting those opportunities.

Finally, there is a broader consideration that, regardless of the perceived need to effect change at playtimes and the good intentions of all concerned we should be cautious. The history, of, for example, curriculum-based interventions might make us pause. The teaching of literacy over the last 20 years (Clark and Cunningham, 2016) serves as a particularly good illustration where mass 'roll out' of the Government policy National Literacy Strategy (DCfS 1998 – 2008), partially justified by its focus on the minority of pupils who struggled to learn

to read and write, failed to deliver academic results expected (PIRLS, 2011) and where a national policy in how to teach early reading have called into question the suitability of 'one-size fits all' solutions (Glazzard, 2017). If we reflect on these examples from literacy and extrapolate them to the context of playtimes similar outcomes might emerge; changes introduced might not benefit those children deemed most in need of support and have unwanted and undesirable consequences for others who had previously enjoyed 'successful' playtimes.

We argue therefore that in relation to the development of playtimes we should pursue a middle-way between the invasive top-down initiatives delivered to schools (a legacy of the late 1990s up to 2010 in England) and 'benign neglect'. Another important consideration in intervention lies in the importance of understanding the *particular* context in which children and teachers work thus avoiding a general approach. Research is emerging on supportive interventions and a common theme arising is the value of these diverse, developmentally appropriate and, in part, largely adult-led 'games' or activities to enable children to initiate contact and to engage in prosocial behaviours. McNamara, 2015 has argued for this more carefully 'managed' approach to playtimes in which, pupils are interacting in a context where they can build and refine their social skills. These situations may afford opportunities to develop, for example, competences of perspective taking, reciprocity and conflict resolution in order to build relationships. However these interventionist approaches can also be problematic if they are implemented unreflectively as they make take the agency away from children (Blatchford, 1998) and appropriate their play (Prompona, Papoudi and Papadopoulu, 2019).

Our research findings indicate possible ways forward to successful interventions. We can see that playtimes are an aspect of the school day where children are interested and keen to contribute their views when asked. In addition the children feel largely very positive about the adults who care for them and consequently successful relationships could be further developed, with appropriate scaffolding, to consider the children's perspectives. If we are to intervene in playtimes for a diversity of reasons we need to ensure that we recognise the ecology of the particular school and playground including the adult-child and peer-peer relationships within and our knowledge of children's social and emotional development.

Approaches that ensure pupil participation could address the dissonance between pupil views and adult interventions in order to plan and implement change and has been used in the development of playground spaces in the UK (Thomson, 2005, 7). In order to understand the complexity of interactions between pupil experiences, relationships with adults and others and playground space employing a variety of approaches might be most productive including, for example, the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2001) and pupil views templates drawing on the work of McMahon and O'Neill (1992) and Jones and Price (2001) and Hanke (2000).

Reflecting on our research what has emerged is a complex interaction between children's experiences and perceptions of their playtimes, the adult role and the possibilities afforded by the play space. Each aspect can potentially alter the other, from something as simple as the provision of shared equipment to encourage peer play, to the more challenging issues which rely on knowledgeable adults who are aware of opportunities to integrate children who may struggle to make appropriate advances to play. Woolner et al (2018; 240), writing about the broader landscape of school buildings rather than the specifics of the playground, promote the value of conceptually driven research in order to develop successful school change by

exploring 'within schools how the social and physical aspects of school structures interact with each other and with the cultural assumptions and opportunities for individual agency'.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to consider whether the relative 'benign' neglect previously afforded to English playtimes is of benefit to children as this may prevent the scrutiny and prescription afforded to the remainder of the school day. Playtime experiences matter to children, they impact indirectly and directly on their developing social and emotional lives and on their academic experiences and outcomes. As teachers trying to work within a holistic view of the purpose of schools there is a need to understand playtimes, to respectfully intervene to offer opportunities for social development and to tailor that intervention to the needs of the particular context using evidential data.

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Table 1: Pupil views on morning and lunchtime playtime.

How do you feel about morning playtime?

How do you enjoy playtime today?

How do you feel about lunchtime play?
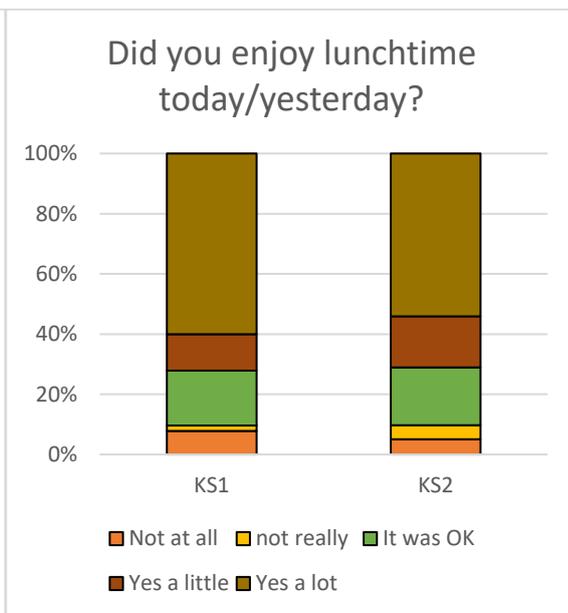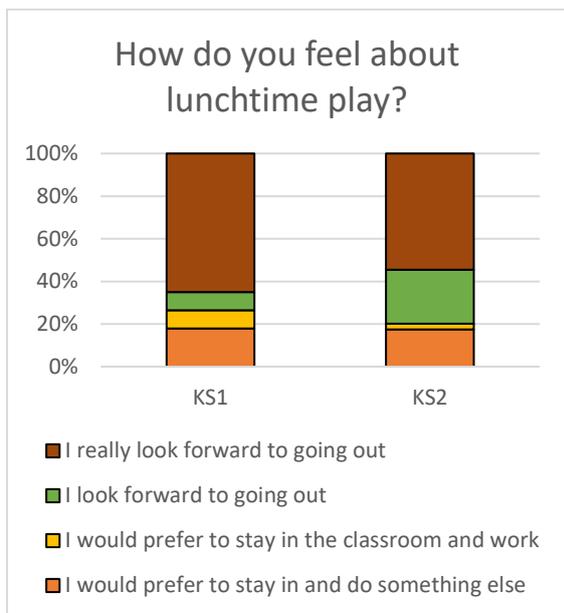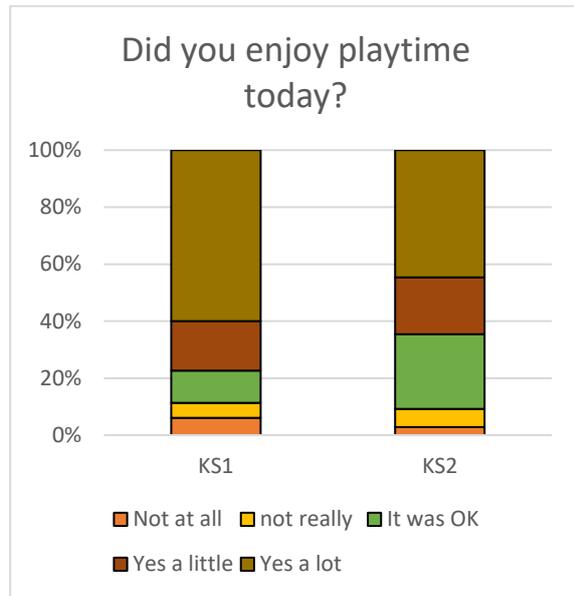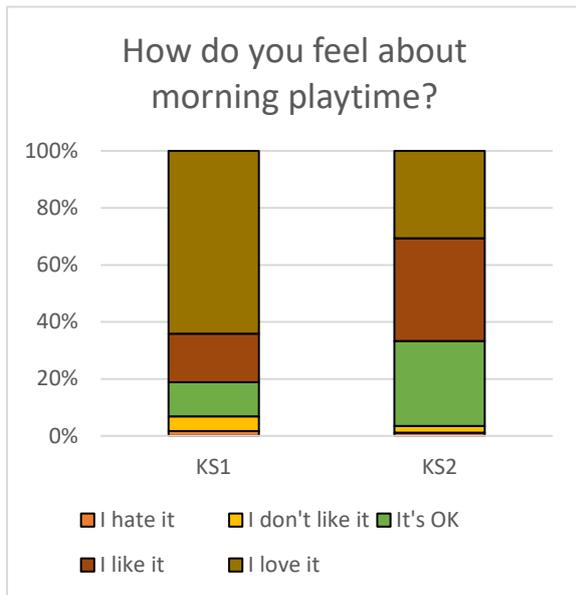
Did you enjoy lunchtime today/yesterday?

Table 2: KS2 Pupil response to: What one best thing do you like about playtime (morning break)?

	Girls	Boys
social	74	43
physical	14	44
Being outdoors	5	7
Break from work	5	2
Independence - choice	2	2

Table 3: KS2 Pupil responses to: what is the most important thing adults who look after you should do? (Morning and lunchtime play)

	Morning playtime	Percent	Lunchtime	Percent
Keep us safe	213	82	187	76
Encourage us to play together	11	4.2	20	8.1
Help children who don't have friends to make friends	20	8.1	18	7.3
Prevent bad behaviour	9	3.5	13	5.3
Play with us	5	1.9	5	2
Listen and talk to us	0	0	2	.8
Punish children who don't keep to the rules of playtime	1	.4	1	.4
Total	260	100	246	100

Table 4: Response by gender to question 'what is a good thing about your play space?'

	Girls (111 responses)	Boys (98 responses)
Physical play	45 (21 responses referred directly to the climbing frames,2 'football')	50 (18 responses referred directly to the climbing frames, 19 to football.)
Comments general re: equipment	16	15
General space	12	10
Reading / quiet/ learning	6	4
Performance	2	0
Green areas	7	3
rules	1	3
Nothing	2	2