



# Power and Play: the control of play in primary schools' grounds

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## Background Literature

In Wales (UK), primary school grounds are not readily available for children to play in when the teaching day ends. For the most part, after-school recreational activities in school facilities are organised and structured by adults (Play Wales 2012). School grounds in Wales vary widely in terms of size and features, ranging from a small tarmacked area to those with more features, such as large fields and woodland areas and in line with Foundation Phase guidance, schools in Wales have been developing outdoor spaces (Maynard and Waters 2014).

This paper builds on previous research by Thomas et al. (2007) who identified advantages in expanding the amount of time that outdoor school spaces were available for children's play. Research has found benefits across a range of outcomes when children can access their right to play (Lester and Russell 2008, 2010; Sutton-Smith 1997; Hughes 2012). Waller (2008) emphasises the importance of regular access to outdoor spaces, while Adam and Dymont (2010) highlight that children when given choice will prioritise playing in green open spaces. However, there is evidence from a range of sources that children's right to play as laid out in statute (Williams 2013) and policy are failing to be met (Play England 2013). Challenges that have been found to limit access to play are those such as fear (from strangers, litigation, accidents) and space and time (Gill 2007; Dyson et al. 2016; Connolly and Haughton 2015).

This poster focuses on what factors appear to influence schools in allowing access to school grounds after the school day in the Welsh context.

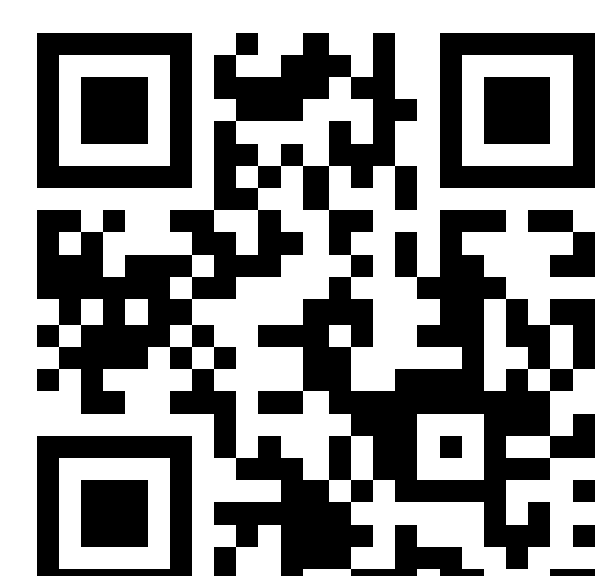
## ETHICS

The research team acknowledges there are limitations in the extent of the reviewed evidence-base; the sources used vary in methodology, remit and timescale and represent readily available material rather than a systematic review of published literature.

All participants (caretakers, head teachers, school governors, teachers, the project intervention manager and the student volunteers) all provided written consent and were given information and the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw if requested.



Figure 1. Intervention in action



## Methods

- The research adopted **action research** methodology.
- An **intervention** was undertaken within schools for 6 weeks
- The intervention allowed children to use the school grounds for 2 hours after school on two nights of the week and was supervised.
- The intervention was supported by a toolkit document designed by Play Wales (Play Wales 2016)
- The data collection was undertaken through semi-structured interviews collected pre and post the intervention.
- There were 16 Participants (caretakers, head teachers, school governors, teachers, the project intervention manager and the student volunteers).
- Three schools were involved in the action research. They were identified and recruited on the basis that each was located within different types of localities and varied in terms of communities' existing accessibility to the school grounds.

School A was located in an urban area with a pupil population of approximately 400 pupils. **Prior to the project, School A locked the school gates. The grounds in School A consisted of a grassy, unshaded area with access to fixed play equipment.**

School B was a faith school located in a rural village with a pupil population of approximately 100 pupils. **The school grounds of School B were accessible to the public 24 hours-a-day. However, the school reported that this accessibility was not taken up by the community. School B comprised a small grassy area, Forest School site and fixed play equipment.**

School C had over 500 pupils and was situated in a suburban area. **Prior to the project, parts of the school grounds were accessible to the public. School C was the largest of the sites, with tarmacked space for play, large sports fields, sloping grassed sections and a Forest School area.**

The data presented was derived from a thematic method of analysis (Bryman, 2012) using NVivo analysis software.

## Results

There were four ways in which adults influenced power and/or control over the play: **What; Where; Who; and When.**

**WHAT: Controlling what play activities were allowed or facilitated:** In all three schools a range of constraints were imposed by school staff. These included fears over the weather and value judgements about children's over-reliance on playing with bikes and football rather than imaginative play. There were also fears around children's safety in certain spaces within school grounds. Teachers in particular suggested that rules or structure should be incorporated into the project play sessions. Prior to the project some teachers and school staff were concerned about the level of supervision during the project and the extent to which the after-school play sessions would be structured and controlled.

## Results

**WHERE - Controlling which spaces were allowed to be accessed**  
The safety of spaces were discussed by staff at School C, staff felt there should be a level of control over which parts of the school grounds were opened during the project. School C had been advised by its insurance company to improve the fences and gates around the school in order to limit public access to the space. School A also raised issues with regard to access, this time in relation to access to the school building after school had finished.

**WHO - Controlling who used the school grounds.**  
Prior to running the project, some school staff were concerned about the use of the school space by 'others' and felt this needed to be 'controlled'. In particular, participants seemed fearful of the use of the after-school play sessions by 'older' children. In the post-project interviews it became clear that no issues around 'other' children had arisen.

**When - Controlling when space was used**  
The research team envisioned schools opening their school grounds five days per week with open access to children from local communities. However, during the period of seeking consent, schools set parameters, limiting access to their school grounds to an hour and a half on two evenings per week.

## Discussion

What emerged from the data within the pre-interviews was a tension regarding who was responsible for managing the school grounds once they were opened up and mitigating the negative perceptions, such as a fear of litigation, damage, vandalism and the possible impact of older children causing problems. **However, post-project interviews indicated that since then their initial fears had not been realised.**

Moreover, the findings from the study highlighted the contrast between stakeholders' views of children and childhood as a time of freedom and play which was conflicted with their concerns, as constructed by society, regarding the protection of both children and spaces for which they felt guardianship and a responsibility.

## Conclusions

In terms of moving forward with the remit of enabling schools to make their grounds more accessible for children's play, schools responded positively to the provision and facilitation of an 'open all hours' ethos in their grounds.

Since the provision by student volunteers and academic staff ceased within the schools, encouragement to provide on-going provision has been discussed. However, it was suggested that with no monetary investment, combined with staffing and the responsibility for organisation and the time it would take to do this, on-going provision would be unlikely. Despite these practical difficulties, it is suggested that given that the pre-project concerns were not realised during the opening of the school grounds, this is a beneficial and worthwhile undertaking, which is recommended for incorporation into strategic planning (see Greatorex 2011).

## Contact

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