

Putting Enjoyment into the Lunch Break

Enhancing effective practice at Ferndale School

Dorothy Wilson – Deputy Principal, Ferndale School, Christchurch

Stephen Evans – Play Skills and Sports Coordinator, Ferndale School, Christchurch



ABSTRACT

Ferndale School is a special school catering for students in the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS). We sought to explore how a sense of well-being and belonging for students could be fostered during the lunch break at the base school.

Students' need for close supervision during lunch hour meant that staff found it hard to successfully engage the students in activities during this time. Parent and staff surveys and video footage were used to identify the changes to be made, and allowed the research team to monitor the resulting changes in the area of student participation. Worthwhile outcomes were identified for children, teachers, and the whole school.

Practice Paper

Keywords

Action research, effective practices, physical activity, playgrounds, social interaction, student participation, teacher development, teacher roles.

INTRODUCTION

Historically the lunch hour had been regarded as an area for improvement by teachers, teacher aides and therapists. A number of changes had been attempted, for example, splitting the lunch hour into two separate blocks and employing a specialist games coordinator. There was general agreement, however, that the students' experiences at lunch times still fell short of the following goal identified in the school's charter:

The school is committed to ensuring that all students are given an education that will enhance their learning, respect their dignity and meet their special needs.

Students have a full hour in the playground as they complete their lunch routines in the classroom prior to the break period. All classroom teachers and teacher aides are on a roster for playground supervision duties with four on duty in the playground at any time. The playground is comprised of a large climbing and activity structure, a grass area, a large open hard surface area as well as an enclosed area for riding bicycles. Students have a particularly diverse range of abilities and physical competence.

The research team's motivation for implementing an action research project to investigate practices and student outcomes around lunch time experiences was underpinned by the following five issues:

1. The need for close supervision meant that staff could not successfully engage in activity with students, and social interaction or play between students occurred more frequently in the company of an adult.
2. A number of students were frequently observed wandering without purpose, or sitting without engaging in any activities.
3. Incidents of inappropriate or aggressive behaviour had been reported and the school provided one-to-one supervision for those students identified as being unable to operate in the playground on their own – this placed a strain on the school's overall funding.
4. Staff had raised concerns about student well-being particularly in the winter when lack of physical activity resulted in students becoming cold and uncomfortable. The school makes the decision to keep students inside at break times with extra staff supervision if the weather is too cold.
5. Student relationships were strong within individual classes but not across classes.

Members of the research team (two classroom teachers, the deputy principal, one occupational therapist and the research associate) wanted the lunch time experiences to meet the school's goal of providing a supportive and caring environment for all students. Better use of this hour of the day at school could provide students with more positive experiences that would support them in viewing themselves as members of the school community.

METHOD

We began with a parent and staff survey to gauge the extent of concern and to elicit ideas for improvements. The survey was distributed to 23 staff (teachers and teacher aides) and 33 parents. 16 staff and 16 parents responded. Responses were collated and the following four outcomes were discussed by the research team.

1. Parent and teacher groups' primary concern was student safety, while a secondary concern was that students would have opportunity to socialise and enjoy time outside of the regular classroom.

2. Both groups believed the level of supervision was satisfactory, but that social interaction among students could be better.
3. Both groups held similar ideas regarding the types of activities that could be offered; ball games, music and moveable equipment featured strongly in the survey.
4. Some staff did not particularly enjoy lunch time supervision duties, and words such as child minder, prison guard, trouble-shooter and babysitter were used by some to describe their role. Teachers felt that their time was consumed by the need for constant supervision, which restricted their ability to engage in interactions with students.

Video footage of three lunch times was used as a basis for analysis of what students were doing in the playground and to identify areas that could be improved. Findings from the survey and the video footage were considered by the research team as they put together the next step in their action research process.

Action Cycle 1: Plan for Change

The research team began by grouping students according to their level of social participation. The decision was made to focus on developing opportunities for social participation with one of the groups. Six students were chosen as case studies. These students were to be a focus for staff to monitor and identify changes in participation. This decision later became less helpful in terms of our research.

A key teacher was assigned to begin implementing additional lunch time activity for students on four days a week over the period of one school term. This suggestion had been made by both teacher and parent groups in the survey. This teacher was to be responsible for developing and adapting a variety of games and activities that students could participate in. Other staff continued the lunch time supervision duties as set out on the regular school roster. The deputy principal assumed overall responsibility for supporting the key teacher and any other administrative requirements as they arose during implementation of the research.

Action Cycle 2: Making a Difference

The key teacher met with the researcher and deputy principal weekly to reflect on what was happening for students. Data that formed the basis for reflective discussion included:

- the key teacher's journal documentation of daily activity, his reflections about student participation and comments made by other teaching staff that were considered important
- the researcher's video of lunch times, once change had begun to occur.

Further meetings between the key teacher, researcher and deputy principal occurred at regular intervals over the course of the research project. The key teacher reported on the research progress at weekly school staff meetings, and teacher feedback from these meetings was documented.

In the first two weeks of implementing change the key teacher focused on developing a repertoire of social games for the "player" or case study group of students. Following early reflections this focus shifted as students other than the defined list of "players" were observed to display interest in becoming involved. The continued focus became one of looking for ways to provide a sociable setting in which students could select to participate from a range of adaptive activities.

Aspects of the playground were physically changed to encourage more social participation, for example, seating was arranged in a grouping layout, and accessibility to resources and equipment designed for individual and group play was increased. Resources were developed and introduced to the playground. Both were designed to allow students to participate in ball activity on their own or with and alongside others. These students were able to participate without reliance on adult support.

The research team accessed relevant literature to gain more understanding about social involvement and participation in relation to children with special education needs. Of particular interest was the work by Fergus Hughes and Daniel Hollinger on the role of play with special education needs children. Both acknowledge the important role of adults in giving reinforcement and feedback to students to encourage play. Concepts such as social exclusion and peer tutoring were discussed, and peer tutoring was trialled among a selection of students. The "tutors" were asked if they could help another student to play for short periods during the lunch break. The pairing of tutor and peer involved careful selection based on observation and knowledge the key teacher had gained about student preference and participation.

External expertise was accessed. Sport Canterbury provided teachers with a series of three half-hour workshops on adaptive physical activity. This external input contributed to heightening teacher awareness of adaptive physical activity for students. However, the teaching team also reflected on how much of the information shared appeared to be more relevant in a mainstream context. A health and physical education (PE) curriculum advisor then met with the key teacher to assist in this essential learning area. The discussion affirmed that there was a direct correlation between what students were experiencing and learning in the playground, and the intentions of the curriculum document. It was at this time that a reflection was made, "It would be great if everybody could view this as increasing children's curriculum by one hour everyday".

Changes in student participation formed the main area of discussion at weekly meetings. The video footage proved to be instrumental in identifying change in individual participation. The footage also showed observations of student participation that may not have otherwise been viewed. Notice was taken of the type of activity individual students selected and how they participated socially. Weekly findings influenced ongoing provision of lunch time activity as careful consideration was made to foster peer interactions and play friendships.

Early findings highlighted the fact that increased participation was evident from a wide range of students. Some of the biggest and most interesting shifts were occurring in the other students.

As the project progressed informal contact between the key teacher and individual classroom teachers increased. Staff became interested in the developments and began to share their observations about individual students. As one stated, "I have never seen (student) so enthusiastic about participating in physical activity." Staff began taking responsibility for preparing and supervising playground activity on occasions when the key teacher was absent. The changes occurring in the playground were seen to be valued by the whole school.

RESULTS

A key finding has been the recognition of students as more capable than previously acknowledged in three key areas:

1. Physical – students engaged in more physical activity than previously observed.
2. Social – cross-class relationships, sharing and turn-taking and having fun together were observed as a result of peer tutoring and playful interactions during student choice activities.
3. Participation level – students were drawn together physically by the equipment/resource and environment layout; the location of the activity or resource became the focus for interaction rather than staff relying on the students to initiate social contact.

TABLE 1
Change identified in selected students.

Student	Prior knowledge/observation	Changes identified
T	Chose to sit near classroom, active participation seldom observed.	Moved to main activity area alongside others. Regularly played with ball games, displayed enjoyment.
S	Typically stayed near one corner of playground, few interactions, not particularly active.	Responded to peer tutor and joined cooperative games. Began to initiate own participation.
M D	Remained sitting on verandah by classroom during lunch. No physical or social interactions.	Responded to peer tutor. Became physically active, enjoying running, and initiated play with peer tutor.
L	Intense play with bark, water puddles, dirt. Required lots of supervision.	Choice of play material changed to use of PE equipment. Observed playing nearer to others as if more comfortable in the social situation. Less intervention by staff.
A	Sociable with at least one other regular peer. Physically active using most of the playground at various times.	Took on responsibility of peer tutor. Relationships developed with peers from other classes.
N	Constant one-to-one teacher supervision required owing to behaviour. Wanders about with little engagement in play.	Calm, playful periods observed using the crash mat. Did not aggressively respond to close proximity of others. Supervising teacher relaxed and was able to interact with other students. Eventually one-on-one supervision was no longer needed.

The initial categories the research team used to describe student levels of participation became less easy to define. Students no longer easily fitted into the groupings.

The original idea of following case study children became unnecessary as different students came to the fore in our research at different times. We found that we were taking notice of all students. It was beneficial to the research to continue in this way rather than limit our view to six selected students.

The role of the key teacher shifted from one of initiating activity to that of observing and responding to student choice of play following the provision of appropriate resources. As one of the research team commented, 'We were following the child's lead now, not the adult's.' The resources offered in the playground became the "magnet" for student participation. The resource itself appeared to provide the initial focus for students, which in some way took away the need to initiate social interaction through making eye contact or verbal interaction. Through participating with the resource, students naturally interacted with peers as their activity became one of playfulness and enjoyment. Results for students, teachers and the school are summarised on the following page.

Student experiences, learning and development included:

- students self-selecting from more “user-friendly” playground environment
- students being drawn in from the perimeter by the “busyness” of their peers
- student play becoming more purposeful and appropriate
- students’ peer interactions and friendships developing through more playful interactions
- new (and old) equipment/resources being introduced into the playground and thought being given to the type of equipment/resource that would encourage or forestall a particular behaviour; previously we would have provided equipment from a different perspective – our own rather than the students’
- friendships were developing within and between classrooms through a peer mentoring programme
- changes in the audible tone of the playground becoming apparent from comparisons of video footage and providing confirmation of the increase in enjoyment for students and teachers’.

Teachers found:

- the changes in playground activity improved their lives as well as those of the children
- they felt happier and more comfortable in their role on playground duty, and although a supervisory role was still essential there was less of the “prison guard” mentality, and staff were able to interact more freely with students
- they had increased awareness of the diversity of need amongst students in the playground environment
- a one-on-one supervision roster for a particular child with behavioural concerns became obsolete as his participation in activities increased, and this reduced pressure on staff across the whole school.

For the school as a whole:

- through staff development in PE there has been an increased awareness across all sites of the need for students to be engaged in meaningful play experiences
- staff acknowledge that appropriate play needs to be planned for and that it doesn’t just happen.

Examples of change in student participation can be viewed on the short video we have produced in support of this final research report. The video brings to life the improvements made in playground experiences and the resulting shifts in student participation.

DISCUSSION

Where to from here?

The impact of teacher learning during this research project precipitated lots of discussion within the school. Two main issues were identified as requiring continued attention:

1. The sustainability of the lunch break activity. Could this now become a part of regular school practice without reliance on a key teacher?
2. The transference of experiences to satellite schools. The school has six satellite classes situated in neighbouring schools. There was a sense that what has been learnt at the base school could be transferred to benefit students at other sites.

Early in the new school year teachers and management met to discuss these ideas. A number of decisions were made as a result of this meeting. The key teacher involved in this project has been assigned a new position as a play therapist/sports coordinator. This role involves moving around the base school and satellite schools to support teachers and children to create sociable play environments during the lunch break. Early observations at the schools hosting satellite classes showed similarities with what had been occurring at Ferndale School. As the key teacher commented, “I’m seeing a similar attitude among the staff.” Provision of accessible resources and equipment in a socially interactive area, peer tutoring, and adult modelling and facilitation, form the basis for future developments within the satellite schools.

Changes have continued in the organisation of the lunch hour at Ferndale. The research project reinforced the fact that students benefit from some form of structure during the lunch break. The previous unstructured hour had been too long for students to cope with. The project highlighted the need for consistency of adult facilitation throughout the lunch break activity. Employing an extra teacher over the long term to take on this role was not financially sustainable. To provide continuity of play activity and also meet staff need for lunch breaks, the lunch hour has been divided into two. The base school looked to experiences in satellite units and found a model that worked well in one of the units. The first half-hour is used flexibly at the discretion of the classroom teacher. The playground can be used under class teacher or teacher aide supervision.

During the second half-hour all students will have use of the playground at which time the social play environment will be provided with one staff member assuming responsibility each day. Students will now be involved in setting up the resources and equipment on a daily basis with support from teacher aides. Pictorial lists have been developed to support them with selecting and organising the equipment.

CONCLUSION

Although this is a school for students with special education needs, those needs cover a wide range of abilities and interests. The provision of playground resources needs to be carefully thought out. It is not a case of one size fits all.

Assigning a key teacher to explore possibilities and implement change during the lunch break proved to be beneficial to the school as a whole in the long term. Having a “fresh pair of eyes” was useful in terms of questioning and then improving the layout of the existing playground. The key teacher and researcher’s weekly analysis enabled a clear focus to be maintained. They were not confined in their knowledge of students (as a classroom teacher may be) or constrained by other school commitments. The developments provided the school with an effective model of what was possible. Evidence of the value of this is the way the school is now transferring what has been learnt to the satellite classes.

Reflections on participating in research

As participants, the staff involved in this project viewed themselves as novices in the action research process. Flexibility in the process proved to be one of the main advantages for the research team. For example, the team were able to deviate from the initial plans in direct response to the emerging nature of the data. Rather than restrict developments by focusing on six case study students it proved to be more beneficial to retain a view of the whole student group. The flexibility of action research allowed the team to make changes to their plan. The use of video footage as a data-gathering tool provided the team with the ability to do this. This aspect of the use of video was something that was not recognised in the initial planning of the research. It emerged as the process unfolded.

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Dorothy Wilson



AUTHOR PROFILE

Dorothy Wilson has been involved in special education for more than 20 years. She started her career in special education at Ruru Special School in Invercargill before moving to Christchurch and Ferndale School. She is now the deputy principal of Ferndale School.

Email

dorothy.wilson@ferndale.school.nz

Stephen Evans



AUTHOR PROFILE

Stephen Evans has taught at a range of primary schools and worked as part of a behaviour team in the United Kingdom. More recently he has taught special education needs classes in two Christchurch schools, and is now developing social, cooperative and physical education skills through play and sports activities at Ferndale School. He is also a trustee for TRACKS, an organisation which mentors young men.

Email

stephen.evans@ferndale.school.nz