

A Muddy First

Play for joy and learning

by Michael Follett, Kristian Hancock, and Diana Suskind

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

Castle Primary School, South West England. It is a grey November Thursday on one of the wettest days in the wettest month, in a country known for its rain. The school grounds are saturated and everything is a shade of brown; perfect conditions for Castle Primary's and possibly England's first 'School Muddy Play Day.'

More than 50 parents arrive, over half of them men, dressed in their wellies and



Michael Follett, BA Honors, PGCE, Director OPAL CIC Ltd., currently runs Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) (www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk) a not-for-profit set up to improve children's play opportunities, especially in schools and early years settings. He

is a former play worker, teacher, and government school improvement adviser. He takes an active part in development of national and international policy and practice. He is currently a Trustee of Play England and has also sat on advisory groups for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Ministry of Justice. His advice work in the UK includes the National Trust and the Football Association and he is currently working with partners to improve play in schools in Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Canada.

After four years at Castle Primary School, Kristian Hancock moved on to be head teacher at Newbridge Primary School in Bath England. www.newbridge.bathnes.sch.uk



Diana Suskind, Ed.D, RIE Associate (Leominster, Massachusetts), recently retired from Fitchburg State University, where she specialized in early childhood education. She is currently an international early childhood specialist and artist. As a result of her

volunteer work at HEMS School in Katmandu, Nepal, she developed Stonework Play, an activity that inspires children and their caregivers to create stories by artistic arrangement and drawing of stones. She has introduced the activity in museums, hospitals, schools, conferences, and other venues throughout this country, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Dr. Suskind coauthored *Baby Dancing, First Edition: 2006* (English/Nepali version) and created a second edition in Spanish as an eBook. (www.dsuskind.com)

waterproofs, ready to get muddy, but no idea of just how muddy they are going to get. Excitement is in the air. Sean, the school caretaker, groundsman, and play leader, has been preparing resource areas. The unknown is about to happen.

The afternoon starts with a short introduction. The school is keen to explain to parents that play is a valuable process as well as being fun. Michael Follett, Director of OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning and a former teacher and government school improvement adviser), opens by asking parents to turn to their neighbor and share about their favorite places they played as children. When asked if it was outdoors, they all raise their hands in unison. Michael then asks, "Do you feel your child has had more opportunities for free-range play than you did?" All but one says "No." He then explains that for 50% of all children, their only place to play sociably outdoors is at school.

A short PowerPoint presentation explores why play, to be truly play, must be made up of experiences that are freely chosen, self-directed, and intrinsically motivated. He says that like wildlife, play needs the

right habitat to survive and flourish; the habitat of play includes time, space, and permission. In modern childhood these conditions are disappearing and with them the opportunities for experiences, which are central to a happy childhood.

As soon as the children and parents are let loose on the playing field, it is clear that the habitat of play has been restored for all. Here there is the space, time, and above all the permission to be playful. A joyous melee of creativity erupts. There are only two rules:

- Have a good time.
- Make sure others have a good time.

Some suggested activities prompt the start of the play process.

The following areas created by the adults invite the children to interact with natural materials. (Text in quotes is from laminated sheets that were provided onsite.)

"Look at the pictures of art created by Andrew Goldsworthy. Can you create your own piece of art using natural materials you find on the field?"

Interested in becoming a host institution for a Fulbright Specialist? On behalf of the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board (FSB), the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State (ECA), and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), it is a pleasure to re-admitt Diana Suskind to the Fulbright Specialist Roster for up to a maximum of five years, subject to continued funding for the program. Your institution can inquire with your local Fulbright office contacting about eligibility and logistics.

Creating a frame of sticks prompts children to create their own picture; they don't have to stay in the box!

"Use the pots, pans, and kitchen utensils to create your own Mud Kitchen!"

This area allows the chef to appear. Using natural materials, cooks both young and old work together to make fine double-chocolate mud pies. And, oh, those muddy pancakes are a hit!

"Welcome to the Mud Ball Catapult:"

1. Make a mud ball.
2. Load the catapult.
3. Take aim at the hut wall.
4. Fire!"

A fantastic encapsulated space in the form of an iron-age hut is created with the help of parents. It is made of trees and twigs and can hold up to 30 children sitting on chairs inside the space. The base is interwoven with twigs. Children catapult balls of mud and straw to form a rough plaster on the hut.

"Mud Pit Challenge. Can you get across the mud using the planks in the pits?"

Children rejoice in taking their shoes and socks off for some squidgy fun in the Mud Pit.

Over the course of the afternoon, the challenge of the mud pit changes from crossing it to seeing just how muddy you can get.

"Animal Swamp: Take some animals into the swamp, perhaps make a place for them to live."

There are toy dinosaurs to play with in the mud and a dinosaur skeleton to paint with mud.

"At Castle Village use your natural materials to make your own mini village."

Using the simple resources provided of sticks, rocks, leaves, and mud, children built their own castle and houses.



PREPARING THE MUDDY INGREDIENTS FOR MUD PIE — PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



MUDDY CHEFS SERVE MUD PIE — PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

MUD PIT CHALLENGE — PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS





Leaf Pile

There is no sign here, just a mountain of leaves. Children get buried, then adults. Leaves fly everywhere. Children and adults chase each other around with handfuls of leaves. There is joy and chaos and a lot of laughter.

Mud Slides

The children used and adapted the suggested activities with their own creative magic. It was great how the mud slides made by the children became the most popular playful activity. Children know best how to be children when given the chance.

Everywhere you look are children and adults having fun together, rolling about in leaves, sloshing, sliding, and wallow-

ing in the mud. Mud-cooks are mixing and moulding; mud-builders are stirring and sticking; and mud artists are daubing and dabbing. Different bright-coloured clothing alters the uniformity of delightfully drab muddiness. Faces are painted and hair caked. The cold English drizzle comes down, ignored.

After the last of the children had been hosed down and taken home, Head Teacher Kristian Hancock reflected on the afternoon:

"Our Muddy Play afternoon was so much more than an opportunity for a free family facial. As well as the children having undiluted fun, it also gave them the opportunity to have a shared joyful experience with their parents, which they will

never forget. A risk assessment was carried out to ensure that safety concerns were accounted for and then the children and parents were let loose to have fun! I am happy that it gave children and their parents a taste of the pure delight of play for play's sake. The only planned outcome was play and appreciation of play."

The mystery of play is that for a process that has no intended outcomes it has a huge range of benefits, as today showed: building independence, creativity, cooperative and social skills, community building, physical competence, communication skills, co-ordination and the underpinning of numeracy and literary competence through the building of narrative.

Appreciation was demonstrated in feedback from children and parents:

What did you enjoy?

- "Having no restrictions and laughing out loud."
- "Watching all the children look free and full of life."
- "Lucy enjoyed getting her hands muddy making a Mud Lasagna."

How could it have been improved?

- "Make the mud pit bigger and add sponges."
- "From what I saw, nothing; children learn so much through play. Well done, Castle Primary, you sure have impressed the Stevens Family."

The late Magda Gerber, renowned international early childhood specialist, wrote, "Children don't play because they learn, they play because they play." What does that mean to you? Why do children play? How might we as adults help facilitate play in its purest form? We invite you to come up with your own questions and/or add to this list.

The Play Cycle Framework

How well is the education market, here and abroad, serving the needs of children

to be children? Kristian Hancock and Michael Follett use the play cycle framework (Sturrock & Else, 1998) to guide their practice in designing valuable outdoor play experiences for children. The UK playwork movement talks about the play cycle being made up of three elements (cue, cycle, and frame). This cycle is the same for the development of any intelligence and is founded on an understanding that the development of intelligence relies on experimentation, observation, and reflection.

1. The play cycle always starts with the child who initiates the play cue: a physical, verbal, or social expression or action.
2. The child then awaits the play response:
 - a. Will the ball bounce back?
 - b. Will the friend agree to make a mud pie?
 - c. Will the adult have the ability to reply with a playful response?
3. Finally there is play frame:
 - a. What does the child do, learn, feel, and experience as a result of his cue and the external response?
 - b. How does he adjust his understanding or framing of the world?
4. Then the cycle starts over, either building on the previous one or heading off in a totally new and unexpected direction.

Castle Primary School is on a journey to playfulness supported by the OPAL program. They realize that education is about the development of the whole child and that childhood cannot be sat-

isfying or complete without play. Part of that journey is coming to a better understanding of the relationship between risk and benefit. Practice in the UK is undergoing a steady change in relations to risk as the Government and the Health and Safety Executive (the body with the duty to enforce the laws on health and safety and guide good practice) have published guidelines stating that children need to experience risk and challenge and that practice, which eliminates risk, also eliminates essential benefits.

The challenge for educators is to address the following questions:

- What do we do for children?
- What value are we to children?
- How are we making childhood a better place for children?
- What can we do better than was done in the past?

At Castle Primary the values we have identified as important include creativity, social skills, enjoyment, cooperation, and competence in overcoming fear and adversity. Muddy Play Day was a huge success in providing fun. The irony is that when the school provided opportunities for children, which abandoned predictable outcomes, the quality of play helped to build the values most important to them.

Reference

Sturrock, G., & Else, P. (1998, June). *The playground as thera-*

peutic space: Playwork as healing (also known as 'The Colorado Paper'). A paper prepared for Play in a Changing Society: Research, Design, Application. The IPA/USA Triennial National Conference. Available at www.ludemos.co.uk/COLFULLa4%20final%2007.pdf

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FAMILY FUN — PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



The renowned international early childhood specialist, the late Magda Gerber, "... taught that 'play exists for play's sake.' It is not directed toward goals and the outcome isn't known in advance." (See *How They Play, RIE DVD, Study Guide*, 2013, Resources for Infant Educators, Los Angeles.)