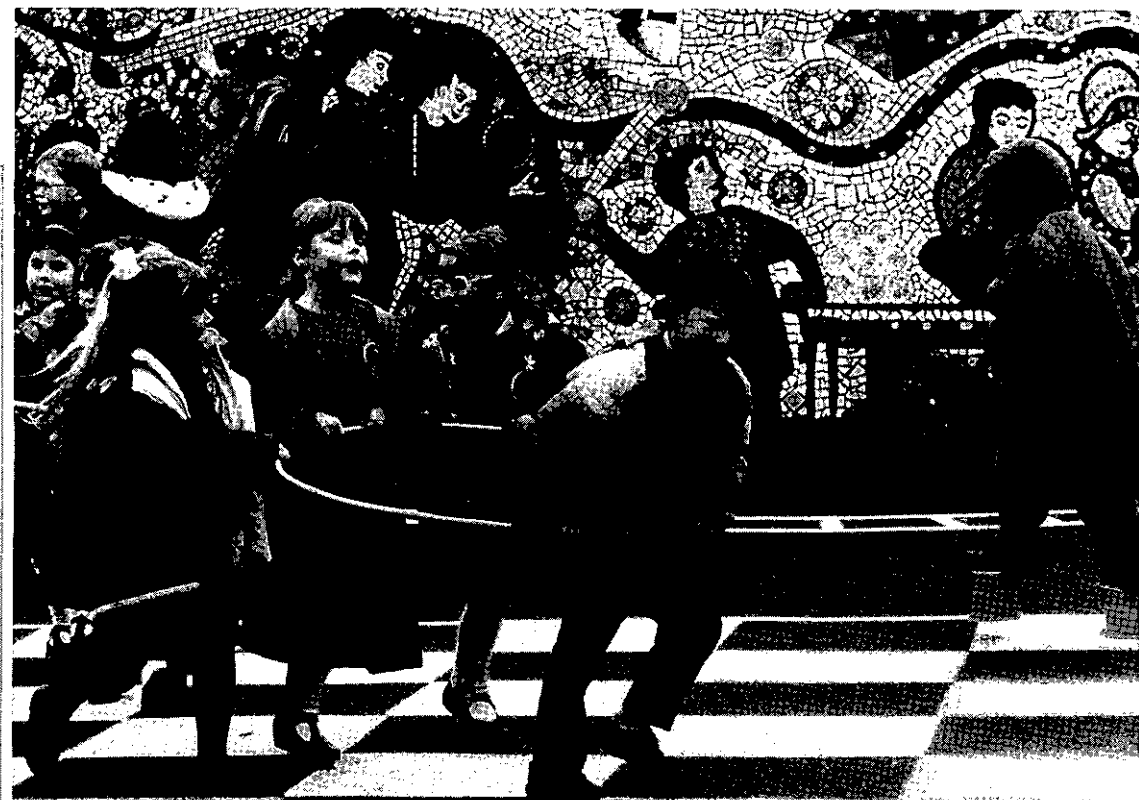


Zoe Evans

# Playtime: when the learning really starts



**O**ur philosophy at Cowick School, Exeter is that once inside the school gates our families have entered into an environment which at every turn expresses our care about the quality of the learning environment that we offer: exciting opportunities for active learning in surroundings that are a world in miniature. Our

planning was inspired by Christian Schiller's dream:

*What I see in every small community (a few streets, maybe one street) is a building, the community's building; and it will be a place to which young children can come to play, to explore, to learn. There will be facilities there far*

*greater than could be provided in any one home. And there will be teachers there to help, teachers who are there as leaders, and mum will come and feel at home, and dad and the people next door, and they'll understand and they will help from time to time.*

### 'Exercise yard'

Five years ago, the playground at Cowick consisted of a walled rectangle of tarmac, similar in many ways to the exercise yards provided for convicts in Victorian prisons. Playtimes meant that for a quarter of an hour in the morning and for almost an hour at lunchtime, the children were herded into this sterile space. Choice of activity was negligible. They could either attempt to play some game which required movement around this space and risk getting into trouble for knocking over those who had very little chance of getting out of their way, or squash themselves against the wall and observe the hurly burly, getting colder and colder by the minute in the winter time.

### Aggression

This inhumane treatment of young children resulted in aggressive behaviour on the part of some, frustration and boredom for most. Tension was very much part of the ethos of playtime and fear too was present for a proportion of our pupils. The price paid in the adverse effect on the workforce on their return to the workplace of the classroom was so high that no Managing Director worth his salt would ever contemplate it. Colleagues may think that I exaggerate or that I describe exceptional circumstances. I think that I describe playground provision which schools have been numbed into considering the norm because of the lack of both financial and physical resources.

The lack of an appropriately-planned space for recreation can undoubtedly be reflected in the atmosphere and attitude of the children when they return to the classroom after playtime or the lunch hour. Bickering started outside continues inside. A sense of aggravation is vented on a peer in a workgroup. It may be hard to concentrate when the activities of the previous hour have caused emotions to be adversely disturbed or maybe even churned. Surely most harmful of all to the young child is the feeling of having been let down by that seemingly kind and supportive adult who you call your teacher — a teacher who on the one hand protects you from any situation

in the indoor learning environment which causes you anxiety, but on the other hand daily forces you outside into the most unfriendly of surroundings without any support whatsoever.

### Dizzy

Three years ago, as part of the upgrading and remodelling programme, we acquired a piece of waste ground which bordered the school. Wonderously, a strip of overgrown orchard was part of the rich acquisition. We were also offered the services of a talented landscape architect deeply committed to providing children with an outdoor environment which matched the richness of the internal one. Madeline Pickthorne and I exchanged ideas until we were dizzy. The budget we worked to was somewhat limited, but the end result was an outdoor environment for the children which gave them personal space and choice. As well as being a proper playtime area, it would serve as an 'outdoor classroom' in which much of the school curriculum could be pursued.

We created:

- *An area of tarmac*
- *A grassed area*
- *A pond and a wild space*
- *Places where fruit bushes and flowering shrubs and trees of all kinds could grow*
- *The kind of grounds where birds and insects and creatures of all varieties could be encouraged to share our lives.*

A wonderful 'Dad' called Richard Baily created a fenced allotment for us. A thousand pounds raised by our community association funded the building of protected space and cages for rabbits and guinea pigs who were later joined by hens and bantams.

### Independence

A wide choice of activity at playtime means that the children have the opportunity to develop independence of mind. Tyron may want his friend Mark to join him in a game of football; Mark, on the other hand, has asked if he can clean out the rabbits. Both choose to go their own way — in spite of close friendship, neither influences the other. Each boy is learning to respect another's choice. The beginnings of understanding for the needs of others is inherent in incidents of this kind.

### Rules and provision

This wide choice, however, is not without its problems. Numbers on certain activities must be limited — not everyone can have their first choice of activity each day, or even their second or third choice. Therefore the children have been given the opportunity to devise the rules which govern who can do what, and when they can do it, exploring the nature of rules and the need for their existence. At a level appropriate to their age, our pupils are gaining knowledge and understanding of both their own and other people's rights.

Involving children in discussion about ideal play provision in the grounds, for example striking a balance between places where you can be active and places where you can sit and rest, has also involved us in discussion about leisure provision in our city and about healthy living.

### Bullying

Learning to stand up for their rights as far as chosen activity is concerned is, we believe, helping children to gain experience in standing up to bullies. Six-year-old Claire knows that a contract exists which states her right to play in the wild area on certain days and that it cannot be challenged by eight-year-old Andrew. She is confident that school law will support her.

### Conservation

The variety of playing area available within the school grounds is helping children towards greater awareness of various conservation problems. The children know that play within the wild area needs to be rationed, as otherwise all the grasses get trampled before they can seed, flowers are crushed, and young trees harmed.

Many living, growing things are celebrated in our outdoor classroom. We have a wide variety of trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses. They must be continually added to. Caring for them and observing them throughout the year teaches so much about the special pattern of the seasons. Conservation is a word in every child's vocabulary as we cherish each flower and grass that we tempt to live with us.

### Individuality

At Cowick, having acknowledged that children are people with varying recreational needs, we hope we are demonstrating continually to our pupils both our concern for their wellbeing and our recognition of individual needs. The children

*The children are being made aware of the fact that different things make different people happy.*

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in turn are being made aware of the fact that different things make different people happy — in one case sitting under an apple tree and talking to a friend, in another being able to climb and jump and run.

Children can run and climb, slide and balance, hide, chase and be caught in our grounds: opportunities for physical challenge abound. They can sit on stiles and logs on a summer's day and dream for a while. They can be together or find a space to lose each other if that is what they want. It is our hope that demonstration of concern is contagious, and that thoughtfulness for the needs of others will be caught by our pupils.

### Welfare

The concern of the school for the children's welfare at playtime and lunchtime has obviously meant a great deal to the parent body and has helped to foster the home-school partnership. Since our battle to improve outdoor provision patently demonstrates care, the trust spreads and leads to a receptive attitude to our approaches to learning in the classroom. A school which obviously cares so much for the wellbeing of children is unlikely to be advocating a 'real book' approach to the teaching of reading if it is not in the best interests of the child.

Certainly we know that children who have 'played well' return to their classrooms refreshed and renewed. The happy ethos of recreational times is reflected in positive attitudes to work and towards their peers after the break.

### Social growth

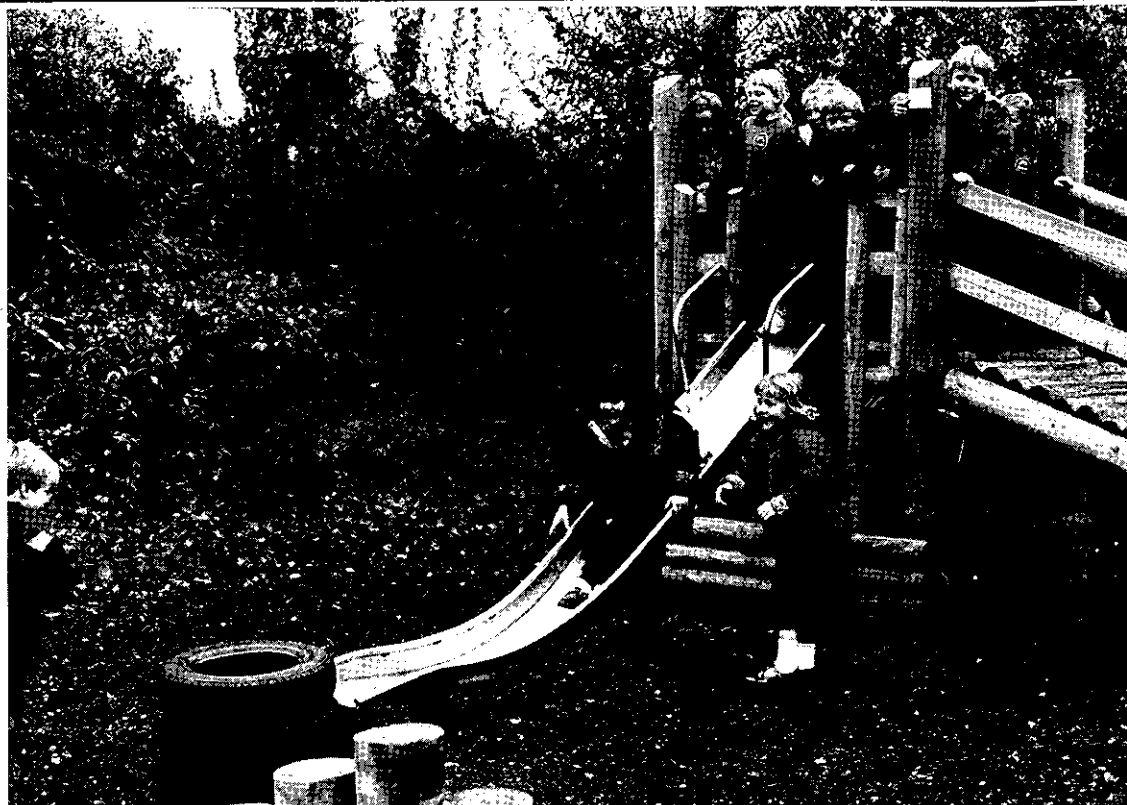
All in all, each improvement in the outdoor environment of the school has brought about an enrichment in the personal and social development of the school community. Christian Schiller, in an address given to a conference of lecturers in training colleges, said:

*For me, 'social growth' means that part of each young child which gives her an increasing awareness and understanding of other human beings as part of her world. The awareness comes from an exploration of a widening field of [person] which gives greater and greater experience of more and more living beings. The understanding comes from an increasing power of identification with other living beings.*

I believe that we now have a space where the kind of playtimes which offer our children opportunities for personal and social growth can

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Part of the activity apparatus installed in the school grounds. Wildlife habitats border the grass areas, some deliberately planted, others original 'woodland'.



take place. The staff of the school can recognise that many of the stated objectives of the 14th of the HMI discussion documents *Personal and Social Education from 5 to 16* are being achieved through our aims for recreational times.

### Using the 'outdoor classroom'

The more interesting the outdoor environment of a school becomes, particularly when it acquires the status of an 'outdoor classroom', the more financially demanding the maintenance.

The original school entrance on the main street has been closed and turned into a community recycling centre for cans, bottles, and old clothes.



Certainly, the upkeep of the outdoor classroom at Cowick is outside the present county specification! Its development has caused immense problems for the contractor, for we have created a veritable obstacle course. For a great deal of time the outdoor classroom takes on the role of science laboratory: if we were a secondary school, a technician would be employed to facilitate the work of the teacher. Our needs are different from those of our secondary colleagues, but not less, and we have seen it as a priority to appoint a classroom assistant for this purpose.

The teaching styles at Cowick move easily but in complex patterns between class teaching, group teaching and individual teaching. Perhaps it is only once a week that the whole class will be brought into the grounds at the same time for a "What has happened since last week?" session. At other times the most appropriate teaching input is when a group of children receive a high-input or perception-heightening session, or are actually carrying out an investigation or task (watering plants, feeding rabbits).

To make maximum use of the grounds, teachers need to be able to plan work for the outdoor classroom and then be able to send groups of children outside to work with the highly-trained ancillary teacher, who is aware both of cross-curricular development opportunities and

has a working knowledge of the ways in which young children learn. Without this support, the teacher will need to work in the outdoor classroom but leave unsupervised groups working inside.

### Romanticism?

We dreamt of and planned for the space to grow. We have no way of looking into the future, but we believe that children who have felt secure in their school and whose trust in the teaching staff's concern for their happiness has never been betrayed will be most unlikely to become the school vandals of the future. Cynics shook their heads, told us we were riding for a fall, accused us of romanticism, told us of the reality which would be for the hens and rabbits to be butchered by vandals and drug-takers to use our quiet retreats. We said, if our ideals are betrayed, if tragedy intrudes, we'll grieve and grow together — in humanity.

Zoe Evans is the Headteacher of Cowick First School, Cowick Street, St Thomas, Exeter, Devon EX4 1HK (0392 55553).

The photographs illustrating this article were taken by the Exeter University Photographic Unit.

(A few weeks after visiting the school to discuss this article, I returned for the photography and saw Zoe Evans again. It was wet and the children were using the hard playground. When I commented on the range of active games and exercises going on, she told me that children were arriving at the school without any apparent games culture and were having to be 'taught how to play'. I wonder if other teachers have had a similar experience? — Ed.)