

Inspiring  
Scotland



Grounds for Learning

## 11-18 Secondary School Play

Views and voices from Scottish schools

Matt Robinson  
October 2014

## Contents

Contents .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Method .....	2
Thank you .....	3
Summary of Current Provision findings .....	4
Summary of Ideas for the future .....	5
Detailed observations.....	6
Current situation.....	6
2. Affordances.....	6
3. Physical spaces.....	9
Ideas for the future .....	12
4. Affordance .....	12
5. Physical spaces.....	14

The **11-18 Play in Secondary Schools** project is funded by Inspiring Scotland through the Go2Play fund and prepared by Matt Robinson, Outdoor Learning and Development Officer at Grounds for Learning (GfL).

This report comprise of three elements:

- 1.1. 11-18 Play In Secondary Schools – **The value of play in secondary schools**
- 1.2. 11-18 Play In Secondary Schools – **Views and voices from Scottish Schools**
- 1.3. 11-18 Play In Secondary Schools – **Inspiration and ideas**

Enquiries, feedback and comments should be made to Grounds for Learning at [gfl@lfl.org.uk](mailto:gfl@lfl.org.uk) or [www.lfl.org.uk/scotland](http://www.lfl.org.uk/scotland).

## Introduction

*A creative playground is only half a creative space; it's also a creative attitude. And we're changing attitudes as much as we're changing spaces.*

*Jay Beckwith, 1973*

## Method

Grounds for learning used many connections with current client schools, through informal and formal conversations. These conversations informed our views.

We made visits to three more secondary schools, where we were able to speak to senior team and pupils, and observe a lunch break. These visits enabled us to see a variety of provision and understand some of the challenges staff and pupils face.

We visited two secondary schools, where we spent three days speaking to staff and pupils and conducting workshops. Workshops were repeated in each school, and with different age groups. Maps of school grounds were used, and various classes took us on tours of their grounds, noting thoughts, observations and ideas as we walked. Time was spent considering space and affordance (the rules and social codes that guide activity). We also considered what was 'free play', and spent time discussing various ideas and prioritising them. These workshops allowed us to ask deeper questions, and garner clear views and observations.

The schools chosen reflected a variety of geography, size and catchment of pupils.

The overall questions we asked were:

- 1.4. What is the current provision and affordance of play in your school?
- 1.5. What are your concerns, barriers, issues or challenges regarding the current provision and activities at break in your school?
- 1.6. What are the benefits of break and lunchtime for the pupils and staff?
- 1.7. What are the possibilities for improving pupil's experiences and outcomes at break and lunchtime?

Unsurprisingly the children were very animated and clear in their views of break time and lunchtime. It is a popular topic, a time that pupils value highly.

Staff had a much more varied view of lunchtime and break, however there was a unanimous interest in the topic.

The results from this work in 2014 was also added to Grounds for Learning and Learning Through Landscapes previous research in 2005, 2006 and 2008.

We have then ordered the results as best we can, and this document has a summary of what were the priority points.

What we have not done is list each and every activity option and school space change that is possible or desirable. This is because we believe that changing of affordance must come before and alongside physical changes to space. In our experience, sustainable changes happen through people.

## Thank you

This section would not have been possible without the help of a number of teachers who volunteered their time, their pupils and colleagues to help with this project. A big thank you to:

Alison Hammerton, Nigel Engstrand, staff and pupils at Speyside High School,

Sarah Felton, Katherine Gallacher, the S5 Leadership class, staff and pupils at Denny High School.

Rachel Gallagher, Trevor Rae and pupils Crieff High.

We have split the results into two areas – affordance and physical space, and divided this by current provision and future ideas.

In this section, we only list the top issues that need addressing. Pupils were generally positive about their grounds – but were clear this was in spite of, not because of the current provision.

We have also produced a basic appendix of our workshops and results. This will not be published online, however interested parties can request a copy from Grounds for Learning.

## Summary of Current Provision findings

### Affordance problems

- Confusion over what play is allowed or expected.
- Peer pressure restricts play types and locations.
- A lack of privacy stifled social play.
- There is not enough time at lunch.
- Little affordance of risky, different or unusual play.
- Being allowed inside.
- No play policies.

### Physical space problems

- A lack of shelter and seating.
- Unattractive (to pupils), large, hard edged spaces dominate.
- Little variation in provision.
- Lack of visual and physical stimulus.
- Pedestrian and pupil entrances less inviting than car and visitor entrances.
- A lack of engagement with decisions on play and space decisions.

## Summary of Ideas for the future

### Affordance ideas for the future

- Have a clear play policy, that pupils are involved with developing.
- Undertake interdisciplinary outdoor learning on a regular basis to develop pupils and staff engagement, understanding and pride in their outdoor space.
- Highlight the value of breaks and develop a culture of play.
- Support affordance of risk in play through curricular learning opportunities.
- Challenge behaviours that restrict other pupils play.

### Physical space ideas for the future

- Provide significantly more shelter and seating in varied locations and styles.
- Break up spaces into smaller discreet but not hidden areas.
- Significantly vary topography, colours and materials used.
- Plant more trees, shrubs and flowers for interest and shelter.
- Have a wider choice of activities and open ended use structures.
- Provide walking paths and routes for pleasure.

## Detailed observations

### Current situation

#### 2. Affordances

2.1. There was a noticeable difference in the expectations and understanding of what was 'allowed' in play and locations for play around all the schools. Pupils thought that there were more restrictions in place than the teachers had put in place. There was also ambiguity over playground rules that were in place, particularly a lack of ownership as to why certain rules and restrictions were in place.

2.2. Many younger pupils in Speyside and Denny commented that a frequently used phrase from teachers and parents was about behaving like adults. This is then transferred over to the playground, with pupils trying to behave 'like adults'.

2.3. At a number of schools, both staff and pupils thought that the decision to stay in during inclement weather was taken too quickly, and often under pressure from parents. Most teachers held a firm view that experiencing poor weather was a learning experience, and that the value of a 'breath of fresh air' out-weighed the cold and wet.

2.4. What was agreed by pupils, was that snow presented many challenges. This was mainly due to snowballs being thrown, and there being no escape or distraction for the groups that took up a real pack mentality with the snow balls.

2.5. There was a genuine pressure from older pupils on the younger ones to behave like the older pupils did. Many of the older pupils recognised (when questioned) that they had different expectations of play and behaviours in the playground – but found younger children's behaviour difficult to be around.

2.6. All the playgrounds were formed of larger, open areas, with one or two smaller, discreet areas. While pupils did not want aged zoning, they were keen on small seating or play areas that you could choose to enter (or not), or a group would adopt on a regular basis. There was a concern that to overly 'contain' these areas with walls or planting may allow bullying or inappropriate behaviours to form, although this was more a concern from the adults than pupils.

2.7. The wide open grass and tarmac spaces, surrounded by square buildings also dominated the children's view of the spaces. Almost universally the pupils liked green space, trees, planting, artwork and more 'pupil sized' spaces. The pupil's discussion often came back to art work and displays in school that they felt were inspiring and attractive in the detail – at odds to the external environment.

2.8. Outdoor artwork of all sorts was of interest to a lot of the older pupils, offering an immediate link to curriculum activities in the schools outdoor spaces, as well as opportunity to increase pupil pride and ownership of the school estate.

2.9. The lack of variation in planting and green space was also bemoaned as the pupils enjoyed the changing seasons. Speyside pupils viewed the head teacher as personally responsible for cutting down 'their' trees to accommodate a much needed extension – and were very keen that the trees are replaced at the earliest possible time. In Denny, although the trees are viewed with mixed feelings due to the lack of access paths and some inappropriate activities being hidden within the woodland, there was a real care for the woodland with pupils expressing a view that the trees were poorly planted and managed, and how they would like to improve that.

2.10. The un-used 'nature garden' also surprised a number of pupils in Denny who were unaware of it being there, and even more surprised by the apples, plums, lettuce etc. that was still growing there despite no maintenance. In Speyside, pupils commented that they liked the woodland that adjoined the school, and that a number of pupils sought out the church and hospital grounds as they contained trees and nice planting.

2.11. Almost all the pupils had a very negative reaction to potentially risky or apparently risky activities or structures in the playground. A few expressed a real fear of risk taking, and more importantly that parents and teachers would disapprove. When the activities that were potentially or apparently risky were discussed however, pupils were very animated and excited by the possibilities. It was agreed that the current playgrounds offer little in the way of risk, and that the risks that are taken are less positive.

2.12. Unsurprisingly, all pupils (and many teachers) expressed a concern that the length of time allowed for break and lunch was being eroded. One pupil from a small rural community, expressed real concern, as school was his only real social interaction in any given week with peers his own age.

2.13. Most noticeably in this reduction was the time allowed in Denny for break, a fear echoed in Speyside as the council further consult about shortening the school day for bus transport practicalities. Clearly time constrains games and activities, but also led to pupil and teacher concerns of not enough time to get physically active or mentally rested between lessons.

2.14. This lack of time at lunch is further exacerbated by the length of time that serving of food took, and the feeling of needing to rush into dining rooms before food runs out or serving finishes, was echoed in all schools that we spoke to and other secondary's we have visited. The process of getting and eating food was not easy for pupils, and was high on the list of priorities for pupils and staff.

2.15. Related to the dining timetable was also the challenge of being allowed to eat canteen food outside. Pupils at Denny recognised the practical issues that that had led to a ban (waste food thrown on ground, leading to gulls and vermin being encouraged), but expressed a view that perhaps they could overcome the issues as part of any changes to school grounds and in using the EcoSchools process.



2.16. There was a common theme in the schools from most pupils about not wanting to be near smokers. The efforts of teachers to ban the few hidden areas from use or being tainted by the smell has effectively cut off many of the areas that some pupils would choose to use at break and lunch. There were many pupil suggestions of formal smoking areas being provided as a possible resolution to the issue.

2.17. A number of other practical affordances also impacted on the pupils use of the spaces in school. There were issues of not being allowed to enter spaces near offices or adult school entrances, as the noise or them being able to look in would disturb or restrict the work happening inside.

2.18. Seasonal issues also caused some challenges. These could be school based, for example exam time caused much disruption, restricting for weeks at a time where and how pupils could play or the spaces they could use. Other seasonal issues included lack of drainage on some areas, and the shadow of buildings keeping some of the playground cold in winter (while the car park basked in sunshine)

2.19. The pupils all expressed pride in their school, to varying degrees, but the overall feeling was it was a space they did not have much say in. This was particularly the case in Denny as a PPP school, where the pupils constantly referred to the fact that 'the company' owned 'their' school.

2.20. There was much debate amongst pupils about the use and support for use of mobile phones in the playground. There seemed an even split in those that were supportive of providing network access, in order to socialise online at break, and those who suggested that it distracted from real relationships and opportunities. Adults were universally negative of pupils having web access on personal devices at school, apart from when they used them as a learning tool in lesson. It was noted the difference in published school policy compared to real life practice in a number of the schools visited.

### 3. *Physical spaces*

3.1. One of the strongest views of pupils was on the (lack) of seating and shelter in their playgrounds. All the schools visited did not have much sheltered seating at all – there was usually one area or bench for the whole school that was outdoors but sheltered.

3.2. The little seating that did exist was of varied type, however pupils commented that they were often laid out in line, rather than a sociable facing each other manner. In addition, a number of the seats would soak up rain and then take a long time to dry. All pupils commented that they sat on the ground in good weather, both on tarmac and grass. There were grass mounds and terraces surrounding sports pitches in some of the schools. The vast majority of seating was of the manufactured ‘from a catalogue’ variety, with no provision for flexible use.

3.3. Overall there was a lack of rain, wind and sun shelter across all playgrounds visited – however two of the schools were new, and the lost mature trees have been replaced with saplings that will long term provide shelter. Of the sheltered areas provided, a couple were ‘accidental’ – under walkways or an old storage area for example, and therefore had no seating. This also means pupils are sharing shelter with items stored, and that lighting and ambience in the shelter was poor.

3.4. Sports pitches of artificial grass were liked, as they could be used year round. For as many pupils that enjoyed the use of the pitches for football, there were as many disliking the fact that they did not feel ‘welcome’ in the space unless they were playing football. At both Denny and Speyside, pupils suggested a simple moving of the football game to one side of the space, allowing other activities to happen without the need to walk through peers occupied with winning a football game. The sports pitches are heavily used in all the schools visited, and the pupils that do play generally were engaged in moderate physical activity.

3.5. As mentioned in the affordance section, trees and planting was seen as a very desirable and offered a lot of benefits: shelter and shade, interest, changing appearance, physical activity and the dividing up of large spaces. Generally, pupils valued green space and proximity to nature highly, Pupils took a lot of pride in protecting wildlife or knowing where wildlife resided in the school grounds.

3.6. Some older pupils at one school suggested that buying lunch off the school premises, was partly to be able to walk and talk, away from school staff and other children. All the schools had a concern for the number of pupils off-site at lunch, mainly due to the poor diet that pupils buying off site seemed to choose. From a staff point of view, reducing the number of pupils off-site was a desired outcome.

3.7. All the schools had a number of pupils that chose places off school site, simply as their ‘secret’ quiet place, in a small social group. This was to be away from other pupils as much as staff. In Speyside, these were from very close to a 5-10 minute walk away, and varied from local play park to quiet church yard. The pupils spoke very positively about being able to choose this place, and that they used it responsibly and positively.

3.8. The current provision of the vast majority of secondary school outdoor spaces is of very large, flat spaces, interrupted only by building or necessity. Perhaps there is a view that in order to accommodate so many pupils, you simply need uninterrupted space. Where variations in topography exist, they are usually because of the micro-geography that was already in existence when the school was built. A number of schools visited do capitalise on the topography or opportunity – for example Strathearn Campus has used small hills as seating ‘terraces’ and Denny had a large bank into which stone seating had been laid. This was commented on by pupils, when they were shown varied topography or it was highlighted how planting and features was used to break up large spaces discreetly.

3.9. The small, discreet spaces that do exist again seem to be by default rather than intention. All the schools visited had places around the building where pupils could hide away if they wanted. These spaces all became contentious, in that much of the pupil use becomes about being able to hide completely. The spaces are seen by most pupils as places to avoid, as they are dominated by smokers, bullying behaviour or similar. This has also led in all the schools to a rise in restrictions in the use and access to the spaces. Despite this, pupils are very positive about having nooks and crannies in their playgrounds, and they are seen as a good thing – as long as contentious uses can be designed out.

3.10. All the pupils spoken to, appreciated the views and surroundings of the school playground. To have a ‘nice view’ was not just about distant mountains or nearby woodland or similar, but about looking over the school playground and buildings - a sense of place and being able to spot friends. The flat nature of many playgrounds restricted this opportunity.

3.11. There was a running theme of the bland colours on the outside of the school buildings, and that the addition of suitable planting and bright colours outside the building would be preferable. One picture that the pupils were shown was of a boy jumping on a BMX – yet the comments drawn from pupils were of the bright yellow and orange colours the building in the background was painted.

3.12. A lack of maintenance of the school buildings or playground was immediately seen by pupils as ‘not caring’. Simple examples were lack of bins, some damaged benches, overgrown trees and litter allowed to build up. Interestingly, the pupils voiced opinion on this clearly, yet also had little motivation for acting personally to improve the situation. Whether this is a ‘permission to act’ issue, or ‘not caring enough’ is not clear.

3.13. In most schools visited during the time of this project, the car dominates the pupils exits and entrances. Pupils commonly walk through car parks, or are diverted around them, to access schools. The pupils commented that this does send a message out, and is disappointing for them.

3.14. In addition, although school entrances for cars were well thought out, maintained and attractive, pupils often felt that to walk into school meant coming in the ‘back gate’, which was not as well maintained or attractively provided for, and

was often then locked during school, while cars had free access to the site at all times.

3.15. A few of the schools had a plethora of CCTV camera's to bolster the staff's view of the playground from various classrooms and staff bases. The children had mixed views of this – some thought it was a good idea as it kept anti-social behaviour at bay, others strongly resented the lack of privacy. It was noted that the camera coverage was not total, and pupils were very aware of where they would be watched – and where they would not. While for some pupils this helped inform where they could be hidden, for others it created a complex set of areas that they would not visit through fear of what might take place off camera. Overall, the pupils felt that the cameras simply observed them and offered little protection from negative behaviours, in the way that an active playground patrol may.

3.16. A number of schools now feature areas designed as spaces for performing arts, or as teaching spaces outdoors. All the areas seemed to be underused, with teachers and pupils unsure of if they were ever used. A number of comments suggested that the spaces provided were in front of numerous classrooms, and overly public. This then meant that pupils were shy of personal, playful use of the space for performances. Teachers too also expressed frustrations that to use the space they would be distracting other classes, and they too were on public display when managing their class.

3.17. A lack of variation in activities was observed. When the question 'what do you do at lunchtime?' was asked, the general answer (apart from get some food) was a variation on 'hang around'. Sports pitches in all schools were dominated by football games that engaged a good number of boys (only), to the exclusion of other sports. The large playground spaces had only limited options for engaging in particular activities, or resourcing for creativity in play. At Speyside, the temporary loss of a single basketball hoop was mourned by a variety of pupils. Observing the pupils at break re-enforces the fact that most pupils felt that there is little to do. The pupils felt that much of the activity they did take part in was not positively welcomed by staff or peers. Examples of this would be walking (to shops for lunch), chasing each other around an object in the playground or finding sheltered seating indoors to socialise.

3.18. Finally, it was noticed that many of the schools had restricted entrances that were located by a function of the building layout and connecting corridors. This caused challenges to pupils looking to exit the building at break time. When allied with the alarmed doors in some schools, this meant that some pupils felt that going outside was frowned upon in some ways.

## Ideas for the future

### 4. *Affordance*

- 4.1. Defend the length of time that is allocated in the school day for break and lunch. This should be done on a positive agenda, highlighting the health and wellbeing benefits and academic achievement benefits that it can bring.
- 4.2. Pupils care about their outside spaces, and this can be capitalised on in practical ways to encourage attitudes and actions that support the learning for sustainability and global citizenship agendas. Listening to pupils views on decisions that affect physical spaces and affordances should be a priority.
- 4.3. Working across departments to plan learning opportunities in a progressive and regular way in the playground will also support pupil's awareness of and care for their school grounds.
- 4.4. Eating outside should be encouraged, and thought should be given to how the practical challenges of litter and food waste outside can be overcome.
- 4.5. Schools should have a play policy, which lays out expectations and rules about the pupils experiences at break. Topics covered need to encompass:
- 4.6. Positive behaviour expectations (including opportunity for younger pupils play behaviours) should be encouraged. Older pupils can be supported to understand the differences in play types.
- 4.7. Encourage strongly being outdoors, in all weathers for learning and play, and have a clear decision making structure on being outdoors in inclement weather. This should weigh up the positive benefits of an outdoor, active play versus an indoor, restricted break.
- 4.8. The policy should lay a foundation for appropriate risks in play. It should show how pupils can be engaged with making good decisions and illustrate to adults (staff and parents) the benefits of play. Practical learning opportunities, likely from the PE department, will support physical risk taking.
- 4.9. Risks should be recognised in all forms – and the document will serve to highlight that in taking social, emotional or performance risks, pupils will need the space to make mistakes and learn.
- 4.10. Clearly define out of bounds and allowed spaces, articulating the reasoning if required.
- 4.11. Ongoing support for play through the maintenance shedule, development of new play opportunities and outside interest (art, tree planting etc).
- 4.12. How to communicate issues and ideas regarding the playground and break times to a suitable group for consideration and implementation.

4.13. Schools may need to work more closely with neighbours and stakeholders when implementing any changes. This work should support engagement with the local community and parents, highlighting the benefits and learning that pupils receive from positive play at break time or lunchtime.

4.14. Local Authority or facilities management staff may need support to understand the schools play policy and benefits of play. They may also need support to understand the related Scottish Government policy on pupils accessing nature in school grounds on a daily basis.

4.15. A culture of play may need developing in some pupils and adults, giving permission for the varied forms play takes and highlighting the changes within the school population as they age. Supporting the play policy through training of staff and communication with pupils and parents should be an on going effort.

4.16. Schools need to ensure that the bell can be heard or seen from all areas of a school ground.

4.17. The opportunity for physical education and physical recreation in the school grounds should be led by the P.E. departments. Provision of a suitable physical space can be capitalised for lessons in physical literacy, 'cross training' or Parkour. By supporting initial skills competence, a playful and creative approach to using spaces, risk management and confidence, pupils will feel that 'permission' to play has been given.

4.18. The thorny issue of smokers (and some other negative behaviours) needs consideration in relation to the negative impact on other pupils' experiences of break. In the schools visited, haphazard reactions in banning pupils from some spaces (because of the few smokers) had a negative effect on the majority of pupils who wanted to use the spaces. Schools already consider the provision of smoking areas for adults and pupils over 16 years old, and this could be built upon in a creative way.

## 5. *Physical spaces*

5.1. Provide (significantly) more seating, with thought given to shelter and how quickly materials would dry out. Think about how the seating materials and shaping can also be multipurpose and open ended in use – for P.E. Parkour lessons, or sitting in less formal ways etc.

5.2. What seating there is should also encourage social behaviours by allowing pupils to face each other in small and large groups, as well as a proportion having tables for eating, working or playing games.

5.3. Provide (significantly) more shelter from rain, wind and sun in all playgrounds. The shelter need not be total, indeed considering varied wind directions and moving sun provides interest to pupils.

5.4. Break up some larger spaces into smaller discreet areas, without creating completely hidden areas or restricting use of the space and dividers. While doing this, schools should be aware of desire lines and pupil movements. This clearly ties in with the issue of shelter and seating provision.

5.5. Provide for food consumption outside, both for packed lunch eaters and those buying meals. This space may also be used for supporting food preparation and cooking outdoors, by the addition of facilities to cook over an open fire. Once again, thought needs to be given to the practical issues that this may present, and what solutions can be found.

5.6. Vary the topography in many ways that encourage open ended and creative use. The topography changes can vary from the significant (hills to act as viewpoints and physical challenge), to simple changes in levels affording climbing and jumping off or variations in surfaces used. This variance in topography should allow for pupils to engage with suitable risks and building of physical literacy.

5.7. Increase opportunity for artwork outdoors – from graffiti walls (that could be used both in lesson time and break time) to larger sculptural pieces and brighter, more interesting building design and landscape architecture.

5.8. Plant more tree's at all schools, as well as planting that provides changing seasonal interest. Access, including seating, should be through, in and around green areas. Thought should also be given to providing fruiting orchard trees and edible plants, providing learning and further engagement with nature.

5.9. Think much more about a pupil's experience of the external entrances and building exits to the playground, both arriving and leaving.

5.10. Provide more entrances to and from buildings, particularly where pupils will be at break and lunch (cafeteria for example) and toilets next to them.

5.11. Installing dirt traps at entrances, and mats inside for wiping feet, will reduce conflict over dirt entering the building from pupils who have moved off tarmac.

5.12. Construct interesting paths, and distances to be walked around school grounds (and beyond), in a weatherproof format. These paths may also visit points of interest – wildlife, green spaces, trees and seating. The paths should offer privacy by being away from buildings and main play areas, while still being mainly visible from them.

5.13. Provide more bins, and ensure they are emptied.

5.14. Provide for alternative sports to football. These could be ‘traditional’ sports such as hockey, table tennis or basketball, but could also extend into more adventurous provision such as a skate park or climbing boulders.

5.15. Similarly, activities such as table tennis or game boards could be provided, but once more thought should be given to open ended and multiple use of resources and the robustness of their construction to facilitate this.

5.16. Provide a performance and classroom space, place or construct it in such a way that it is hidden from too much observation by other lessons and pupils.

5.17. Spaces that can be used to support creativity, social engagement and emotional wellbeing should also be encouraged. Clearly seating, dividing up areas, providing interest, art, activity and proximity to nature all support this agenda, however there are opportunities for specific spaces that support (as examples) music making, mirrors for checking appearances etc

5.18. Consider the use of CCTV carefully, in the light of pupils negative experiences and the agenda of ‘policing’ a playground, as opposed to adult support for play and recreation.

5.19. Offer space and opportunities for teachers who may also wish to spend time outside during break. This will set an example to pupils, as well as benefit staff.