

OPAL Parent observation.

Date: Wednesday 18th September 2024

Time: 12:00 – 13:00

Observation carried out by: Hannah Hogarth, Oakwood OPAL parent play champion

Observation focus:

1. How do children use the space during lunchtime play times at Oakwood?
2. What kinds of play types do children engage in during play times at Oakwood? (Using Hughes, 1996, *Taxonomy of Play Types*)
3. What levels of involvement and wellbeing are children experiencing during playtimes? (Using Leuven scale of Wellbeing and Involvement)

Observation methods:

1. Mapping and tracking – a map of the school outdoor areas was used for a quick sweep of the site to identify where children were playing, which areas were being used and the mixing of age groups and gender.
2. Play types – identify the different play types being engaged in by children
3. Informal conversations with individual children – ‘I am here to look at playtimes at Oakwood and see what everybody is playing. What are you playing today?...’

Report:

1. Free flow: Use of space. Tracking and mapping.

During the first 15 minutes of the visit, I walked across the school site with a map of the area to mark down where the children were playing.

Area	Activity	Play Types
School garden behind Ash and Cherry	4G (Year 6) on stage with 3G Year 1	Socio-dramatic play
Quiet garden between the garden and Brambles	8B Year 5 playing a game	Exploratory play, social play
Brambles	7 reception and Year 1 playing hide and seek	Socio-dramatic play, creative play
Play ground and play equipment outside Beech	34 children on play equipment 2B digging in soil nearby 5G, 1B playing chase 1B wandering	Deep play, symbolic play
School field and pitches	6B Year 2 – grass football pitch 11 B Year 6 on pitch 1 9G, 11 B Mixed years on pitch 2	Locomotor play, Social play

Slack line at the end of the field	7B, 5G – taking it in turns to walk along the slack line	Locomotor play, mastery play
Trees by the KS2 garden	2G climbing the tree 3B watching (Year 4)	Locomotor play,
Bench areas outside Key Stage 2 classrooms	5G on one bench 3G on the other bench with a teacher	Communication play
Running track	13G – running (Year 5 and 6)	Locomotor play Social play
Play equipment, gazebo, outdoor theatre	5G, 6 B – playing in the theatre 14 mixed age and gender on the play equipment 2G in the gazebo	Socio-dramatic play Fantasy play Dramatic play
Concrete playground	1 G playing basketball 2 G on bench chatting	Locomotor play, social play

The whole site was being used with children in every area. Every area had children playing in it. Whilst some children were very engaged in play in one particular area, there was also a lot of movement across the site where groups of children would run from one area to the next. One group were playing chase and two other groups of children were engaged in fantasy play where they were searching for something across brambles.

The movement of the children across the site was very physical with some children running very quickly from one area to the next. There was an impressive amount of physical activity taking place, from ball games on every pitch, to gymnastics, groups running around the track, play equipment being used for climbing and swinging and games of chase. There were also children who were playing quieter games or remained in one area and some places where children were sitting on benches chatting. It was encouraging to see that children were able to find a space that suited the way in which they wanted to play and relax. There were high levels of wellbeing and involvement. The noises across the site were full of laughter, giggles, bursts of 'spontaneous glee' and children calling out to their friends. There were some children who were playing by themselves but they were engrossed in the activity.

Boys and girls were playing together across the site and in all but one football pitch (where a group of Year 6 boys were playing) and a game of netball (where a small group of girls were playing) there was not any area dominated by one gender. Lots of play, particularly with younger children, involved boys and girls.

There was also a mix of ages, with both reception, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 5 in the school garden, Reception – Year 4 in brambles and several years in the playgrounds. I saw examples of young children seeking older children to play with and two Year 6 children leading a game of 'it' in the playground outside KS1.

During this lunchtime, I witnessed lots of interaction between adults and children where adults were supporting children's play. Play workers/ supervisors were actively walking

around the site and observing children and there was an adult in several areas. Children regularly went to the adults to talk to them or to ask for help but on the whole these interactions were child-led. In Brambles, the play worker was helping children to jump down from the tree stump when they asked, but also would watch children who wanted to try doing it on their own.

2. The following are some examples of different play events observed.

Play Vignette: We're not playing! (Four children,)

Hannah: What are you playing?

Year 1 Boy 1: We're not playing!

Hannah: Oh, sorry, what are you doing?

Year 1 Boy: We're catching water monsters!

Hannah: I see. Where are they? Are they scary?

Year 1 Girl 1: You have to follow our arrows. *[Draws arrows along the logs in chalks]*

Year 1 Boy 1: I need some chalk too.

Year 1 Boy 2: Come with me, I'll get some.

Year 1 Girl 1: I'll come too. *[All three run off and start discussing where they need to go next]*

Year 1 Boy 2: Water monsters! *[Another child joins and the four scream and*

It was lovely to see children engaging in sociodramatic/ pretend play and the way in which they developed the narrative. In this example, the children were so engrossed in their fantasy that they did not consider it to be 'play'. The play involved the two children using chalks to mark lines, it involved lots of movement through brambles, journeying through the tree corridors to the small garden. The play was simultaneously creative, involved problem solving and was physical, with the children making the most of the space and the variations in the environment. It was lovely to see how quickly the children were able to immerse themselves in these sorts of games and how other children joined in.

Play vignette: Chalk dust trees

[Five girls are playing in the trees in brambles. Three are in Year 1 and two are in Year 2. They each have chalks and they are covering branches of a tree in chalk. As they cover it,

they discuss how some of it comes off when they put their hands on it to get to the next bit. They keep admiring their creations.]

Year 2 Girl 1: It was Year 1 Girl 1's idea

Hannah: What are you doing?

Year 1 Girl 1: Covering the whole tree in dust.

Year 2 Girl 1: Yes, its actually really hard because it keeps coming off.

Year 1 Girl 2: See? When you tap these branches... [*Taps the sticks together and watches as chalk dust sprinkles off the branch.*]

Year 1 Girl 1: Keep doing it!

Year 1 Girl 3: I am!

Year 1 Girl 1: We have to keep doing it! Try not to touch them.

Year 1 Girl 2: Yes, it keeps coming off!

[All five girls continue to cover the branches in chalk. They are joined by three other children who want to look at what they are doing.]

This is an example of children engaging in arts-based play that involves creativity, problem-solving and teamwork. It was lovely to see the children working together and being determined to cover all the branches. It was clear that one child took a leadership role and the others were busy trying to cover the branches in the chalk. It was also interesting to see how comfortable they were in Brambles together, negotiating their way through the bushes and finding places to sit so that they could work on covering their sticks.

Play vignette: Risky play, Climbing up, jumping down

There were several examples of 'risky play' across the site. This is play that is important for child development as it involves children negotiating risk and exploring play that is physically or emotionally challenging but where the rewards are worth the risk. Firstly, I saw this in Brambles where children in reception and Year 1 were taking it in turns to climb up on to the tree stump and then jump off. For some children, this was a real challenge. A play worker was nearby and watched this and occasionally when a child reached out their hand she stepped forward to support them. On the whole, however, the children were doing it by themselves.

I later saw children on the slack line. They told me the way to get up and off it and that they would watch each other to check they were okay. They found this a real challenge but it was

again good to see them engaging in something that was physically stimulating but where they knew how to engage in it safely.

Play vignette: Don't you want to play?

One child walked off the football pitch and put her head in her hands. She looked upset. As I walked over to her, three children ran over to her and asked her if she wanted to play. She said 'no, you don't want me to play'. I watched as they started to discuss what had happened and the children insisted that they did want her to play with them, they just did not want her to tell them what to do. I watched as they pulled her up and they started to play again.

On the whole, it was an impressive play time. The children were actively engaged and enjoying their time outside. There was lots of opportunity for them to choose who they were playing with and where they could play. When scanning the site to look at levels of wellbeing and involvement, the levels were very high. There were sounds of 'spontaneous glee', shrieks, giggles, laughter as well as quieter conversations and discussion. There were negotiations and conflicts as children tried to decide the rules of games or who would take on a role in one of the games (in sport, chase/ hide and seek/ fantasy play etc). These were also encouraging to see how the children were able to manage this on their own. Teachers and play workers were visible at all times and there were many times when children were chatting to adults.

Recommendations:

The following were discussed in our post-observation discussion:

1. A minor practical point: there were lots of clothes scattered across the field and at the end a lot of adults were having to help pick the items up (this was particularly due to the weather as it was unexpectedly hot!). I wonder whether there could be boxes for each class that the children could place items they don't need in?
2. Continue to look at how the pitches are used to ensure all children who wish to play an organised game (football!) can do so during the school week. (The MUGA should help with this!).
3. Loose parts play. There is potential for this type of play to be developed with more loose parts (for example tyres, tools, planks, blocks).

Level	Involvement	Signals
1	Extremely low	Activity is simple, repetitive and passive. The child seems absent and displays no energy. They may stare into space or look around to see what others are doing.
2	Low	Frequently interrupted activity. The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around.
3	Moderate	Mainly continuous activity. The child is busy with the activity but at a fairly routine level and there are few signs of real involvement. They make some progress with what they are doing but don't show much energy and concentration and can be easily distracted.
4	High	Continuous activity with intense moments. The child's activity has intense moments and at all times they seem involved. They are not easily distracted.
5	Extremely high	The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period.

Level	Well-being	Signals
1	Extremely low	The child clearly shows signs of discomfort such as crying or screaming. They may look dejected, sad, frightened or angry. The child does not respond to the environment, avoids contact and is withdrawn. The child may behave aggressively, hurting him/ herself or others.
2	Low	The posture, facial expression and actions indicate that the child does not feel at ease. However, the signals are less explicit than under level 1 or the sense of discomfort is not expressed the whole time.
3	Moderate	The child has a neutral posture. Facial expression and posture show little or no emotion. There are no signs indicating sadness or pleasure, comfort or discomfort.
4	High	The child shows obvious signs of satisfaction (as listed under level 5). However, these signals are not constantly present with the same intensity.
5	Extremely high	The child looks happy and cheerful, smiles, cries out with pleasure. They may be lively and full of energy. Actions can be spontaneous and expressive. The child may talk to him/herself, play with sounds, hum, sing. The child appears relaxed and does not show any signs of stress or tension. He /she is open and accessible to the environment. The child expresses self-confidence and self-assurance.

Figure 2 Leuven Scales of Involvement and Wellbeing



Figure 3 Bob Hughes, Taxonomy of Play Types