

State of play: school playgrounds from Kenya to Japan

What happens when the bell rings for break? James Mollison photographed school playgrounds around the world to find out



Paso Payita school in Aramasi, Chuquisaca, Bolivia. Photograph: James Mollison

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Paso Payita school
Aramasi, Chuquisaca, Bolivia, photographed 9 August 2011

Situated in a remote area on rough terrain 3,000m above sea level, the school has two teachers and 31 students aged from six to 12 years. Many students have to walk several miles to school. A road to the village was built only 15 years ago and there are no cars or buses. Most people are indigenous Quechua peasant farmers.

Half of the students go on to secondary school, of whom half again go to university in Santa Cruz. A few years ago, an ecological toilet was installed; the children are now teaching their parents and grandparents about the advantages of using such toilets. The school building was small and dishevelled compared with the smart ecological toilets (built by Unicef). There was a big football field and the grass is kept short by goats. I had just missed the afternoon break, but the headteacher said it would be fine to give the kids another 10 minutes outside. The entire school came out; the boys played football while the girls played tug of war.



Likoni school for the blind. Likoni, Mombasa, Kenya, photographed 25 March 2011.
Photograph: James Mollison

Likoni school for the blind

Likoni, Mombasa, Kenya, photographed 25 March 2011

This school has 166 students. Many of them were born with albinism, a condition that often leads to visual impairments. Some sighted students who also have albinism are sent to the school to protect them from kidnapping by agents of witch doctors in Tanzania, where it is believed that body parts of people with the condition can bring wealth.

The students go home to their villages for a visit every three months. The school tries to allow students to move at their own pace and not force them to leave when they get to a certain age. Blind people receive no support once they leave school. A friendly head teacher welcomed us in. Hearing about the trade in body parts, I felt shocked and sad as we sat with the intrigued pupils, who wanted to touch our faces and camera. It was a particularly bright, hot day and the kids had only hats for protection. The boys played boisterous games, spinning the merry-go-round as fast as they could, trying to fling people off it, and feeling their way around the climbing frames.

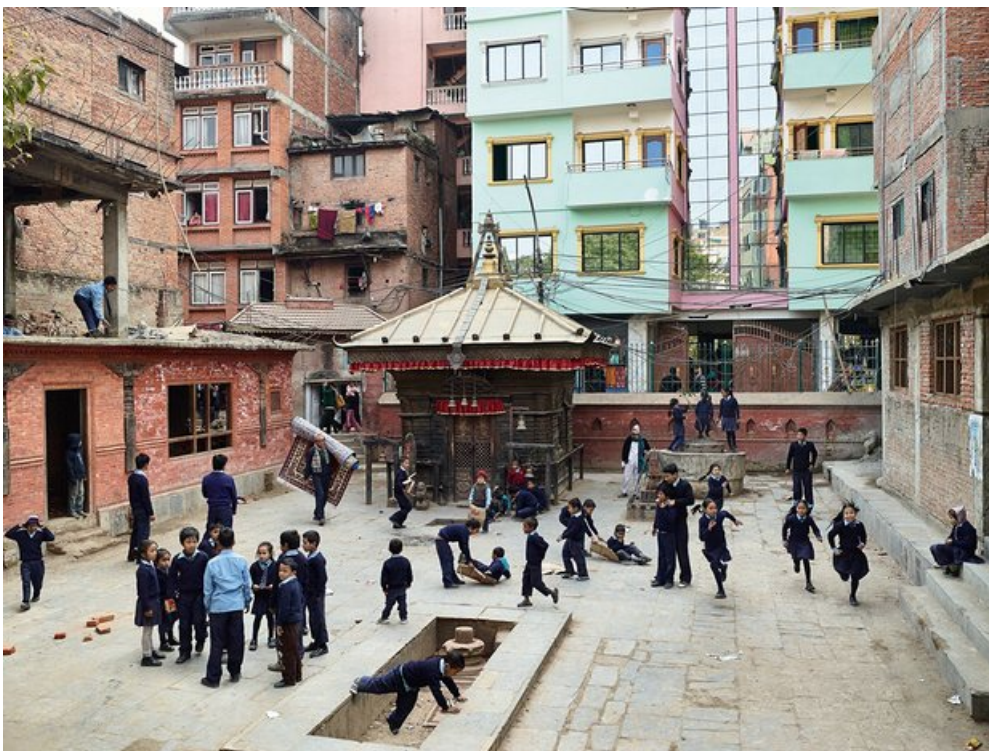


Nativity School. South Central Los Angeles, US, photographed 10 November 2011.
Photograph: James Mollison

Nativity School **South Central Los Angeles, US, photographed 10 November 2011**

Founded by the Sisters of Loretto in 1924, this Catholic school has 330 students and is in a low-income area with a high crime rate. There have been several drive-by shootings nearby and once a stray bullet went through a wall. The school is private and charges \$210 a month, but 65% of the students are unable to pay the full amount. It is a struggle to get enough money to pay the teachers.

When I was 16, living in tranquil north Oxford in the UK, NWA released Straight Outta Compton. LA sounded like a pretty scary place. I wondered what Ice Cube's school would have been like. So we set out to find schools in South Central Los Angeles; Nativity was the only one that said yes. The area has seen an influx of Latinos, who seemed to be the majority at the school. In the break, a group played dodgeball, a game I loved at school. Next to me some kids sold nachos to other students, raising money for the school.



Bhakta Vidyashram school. Kathmandu, Nepal, photographed 5 December 2011.
Photograph: James Mollison

Bhakta Vidyashram school Kathmandu, Nepal, photographed 5 December 2011

The school's two classrooms are on the ground floor of the building on the right. There are about 100 pupils, many from outside Kathmandu. The classroom amenities are basic and the children often can't afford books and pencils.

Education in Nepal was traditionally based on home schooling for the elites. In 1950, only 5% of the population was literate; now it is over 60%, but barriers to education for lower castes remain.

Most of the schools we found in Kathmandu had no playgrounds. We stumbled on this school by chance. The kids were unsupervised at break time. Their playground was actually a public square with a temple; an elderly man whose job seemed to be to look after it seemed oblivious to the noise as the kids screamed around him. They had no toys, but a lot of fun pulling each other

around on cardboard.



Aida boys' school. Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, photographed 8 September 2013.
Photograph: James Mollison

Aida boys' school **Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, photographed 8 September 2013**

This camp was set up in 1950 for Palestinians who had been displaced from their villages, and the school was built shortly after. There are 395 students. During the first intifada, the school was close to the confrontation line between the Israelis and Palestinians, and the classroom walls were thickened to protect against bullets. In 2004, the Israelis built a wall right outside the entrance. As I entered Bethlehem, the road ran next to the wall, which was often covered in graffiti and art, including a Banksy dove.

The third and fourth graders watch the towers to see if the soldiers are looking and, if not, they throw stones at them. When

hostilities flare up, the smell of teargas can be so strong that the headteacher has to send the students home. The boys in the playground were pretty rowdy; the headteacher later told me that the school used to be next to a convent, but the nuns complained that the boys made so much noise at break, they couldn't concentrate on their prayers. I asked him what he thought the boys made of the wall. He described it as "a humiliation in front of them every day, a restriction on their future". Outside his office was a pin board of photos of the school riddled with bullet holes, from the first intifada.



Seishin Joshi Gakuin (Sacred Heart) school, Tokyo, Japan, photographed 7 September 2011.
Photograph: James Mollison

Seishin Joshi Gakuin (Sacred Heart) school
Tokyo, Japan, photographed 7 September 2011

This is one of the most prestigious schools in Tokyo; the empress of Japan is an ex-student. The school was founded in 1908 by four nuns from Australia; students have daily prayer and philosophy studies. Discipline is important and student responsibilities include organising committees, voluntary services and working in the library. Twice a week all students have to clean the

classrooms and the toilets. You enter the school through a wooded area. It has two main playgrounds, an athletics track and tennis courts.

When we first went to the school, it was closed for the holidays, but we had a formal meeting with the deputy head in his office. After several minutes I began to feel itchy. I looked at the deputy head and could make out fleas walking on his shirt and fleas climbing on our translator's face. It didn't seem appropriate to say anything as the Japanese are so polite. As soon as we said goodbye, I rushed to the bathroom and took off my trousers to try to get rid of them.

We returned the next week and found the school spotlessly clean.



St Augustine school Montserrat, photographed 18 May 2012. Photograph: James Mollison

**St Augustine school
Montserrat, photographed 18 May 2012**

Since its foundation in 1875, St Augustine school has faced several natural disasters. The building was twice destroyed by hurricanes. After hurricane Hugo, a major fundraising effort resulted in a modern multistorey building, consecrated in 1991. The 1995 volcanic eruption forced the school to evacuate and eventually engulfed that new building. The school moved to a private house in a safe zone, to which new buildings and playgrounds have been added. There are 135 pupils, from families ranging from affluent to poor.

Most of the boys spent the break playing cricket, while the girls chatted enthusiastically. The picture is centred around a moment when a girl who was running tripped over, making her classmates laugh. There were only two white kids, and the boy spent the break wandering around on his own.



Holtz high school Tel Aviv, Israel, photographed 12 September 2013. Photograph: James Mollison

Holtz high school
Tel Aviv, Israel, photographed 12 September 2013

The high school and technical college is affiliated to the Israeli air force; it has 850 pupils. Conscription exists for all Israeli citizens over 18 (Arab-Israelis are exempted) and nearly all the pupils will be drafted into the air force, as computer or electronics engineers and mechanics. They come from all over the country, either because they want a military career, or because their parents want their kids to have discipline.

We arrived on a parade day, welcomed by the jovial headteacher. I watched students practise military drills. The photograph was taken just afterwards. As well as chess and ping-pong tables, the playground had a few old military aircraft; I wasn't sure if they were a kind of museum or for lessons. The school couldn't have been more different from the arts school I visited in Jerusalem the day before, where girls had dyed hair and there was even the occasional goth.



The Royal Ballet school Richmond Park, London, photographed 13 May 2010. Photograph: James Mollison

The Royal Ballet school
Richmond Park, London, photographed 13 May 2010

The school is split between Richmond Park and Covent Garden; its mission is to train outstanding classical ballet dancers. Every year there are 3,000 applications for just 25 places, and students come from mixed backgrounds: 89% currently rely on state scholarships. The students often have to run to their next class to allow time to change into the right kit. Boys and girls keep to their separate groups.

Getting access to the school took months of negotiation. When we finally did, arriving there was quite magical, entering Richmond Park with all its deer, and then the beautiful grounds of the White Lodge, originally a hunting lodge for George II. The school doesn't have break times, but they do have a bit of time after lunch. The school had suggested bringing a choreographer for the photo, but I wanted it to be as natural as possible.

James Mollison's photographs will be published next year by Aperture in a new book, Playground.

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