

# Teacher Resource

*Playground*: Photographs by James Mollison



James Mollison, *Dechen Phodrang, Thimphu, Bhutan, 2011*

## About this resource

This resource is intended to inform educators about the exhibition *Playground*, featuring photographs by James Mollison, so they are better able to lead students of all ages in meaningful discussions surrounding its content.

## About the exhibition

In conjunction with the publication of the book *Playground*, featuring photographs by James Mollison, Aperture Foundation presents an exhibition of the series. Mollison's photo projects are defined by smart, original concepts applied to serious social and environmental themes. For *Playground*, Mollison photographed children at play in their school playgrounds, inspired by memories of his own childhood and interested in how we all learn to negotiate relationships and our place in the world through play.

Various scenes of laughter, tears, and games demonstrate the intense experiences which happen in the playground. For each picture, Mollison sets up his camera during school break time, making multiple frames and then composing the final photograph from several scenes, in which he finds revealing "play" narratives. With photographs from rich and poor schools, numerous middle schools, and some high schools, in countries including Argentina, Bhutan, Bolivia, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Nepal, Norway, Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., Mollison also provides access for readers of all ages to issues of global diversity and inequality.

## About the photographer

James Mollison's (born in Kenya, 1973) work has been featured widely in such publications as *Colors*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *Paris Review*, among many others. He has also published several books, among them *James and Other Apes* (2004), *The Disciples* (2008), and *Where Children Sleep* (2010).

## Investigations and interpretations

The most enlightening experiences with Mollison's photographs occur when viewers are allowed the time and guidance they need to fully investigate and connect with the artwork. Teachers can facilitate this type of learning by leading inquiry-based conversations about what their students see, think, and feel.

This exhibition presents a unique opportunity for teachers and students to discuss difficult topics, such as bullying and inequality, in a nonthreatening space. They also have the opportunity to explore ideas about what makes a playground a playground, and about the use of imagination to create joy, as well as connect with the experiences of children across the globe.

Before the conversation begins, offer students a few moments to examine a photograph and carefully investigate the scene. Ask them to look closely, and challenge them to make sense of what they see. Encourage students to share their thoughts and ideas about the artwork, and guide a dialogue based on their inquiries, perceptions, and thoughts.

## Themes found in the photographs

Each photograph in the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity to discover and discuss the following themes, vocabulary words, and concepts.

<i>Equality/inequality</i>	<i>Adolescence</i>
<i>Imagination</i>	<i>Confusion</i>
<i>Bullying</i>	<i>Peer pressure</i>
<i>Conflict resolution</i>	<i>Discipline</i>
<i>Community</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
<i>Global diversity</i>	<i>Shame</i>
<i>Play</i>	<i>Jokes</i>
<i>Drama</i>	<i>Aggression</i>
<i>Friendship</i>	<i>Sympathy</i>
<i>Negotiation</i>	<i>Individuality</i>
<i>Storytelling</i>	<i>Excitement</i>
<i>Supervision</i>	<i>Self-awareness</i>

## Selected photographs and extended captions

Teachers can further enhance students' understandings and interpretations of the photographs by providing certain contextual information. Review the following selected photographs and the accompanying captions. Choose which images you would like to investigate and discuss with your students.

## Sacred Heart Catholic Secondary

School, London  
March 19, 2010



Since my visit this school has converted to academy status and moved to a new site. The school is in a rough area, and regularly falls in the top five percent of all secondary schools in the UK on Academic Value Added tables. Eighty percent of the pupils are of African heritage. Ofsted assessments both before and after the changes rated the school as outstanding and praised the pupils' behavior. "Students conduct themselves with impressive courtesy, generosity towards others and commitment to achieving the very best. Students feel completely safe within the school," inspectors noted. That was not the impression that I had: the school was one of the most boisterous that I visited, and I saw several students being bullied, as well as a fight that captivated the whole school.

## Manera Primary School

Naivasha, Kenya  
January 18, 2011



There are 458 girls, 412 boys, and fourteen teachers at Manera Primary School. Some classes have over one hundred pupils. There was a surge in enrollment when the Kenyan government introduced free education in 2002. Many of the students' parents are employed by the flowerexporting businesses on the shores of Lake Naivasha. This is temporary work and they may move on when the flower season ends. Others are unemployed and cannot afford to buy uniforms, which pupils must have in order to attend school. One-parent families are the norm and there are many parents who struggle to feed their children. The school was badly hit in the violence that followed Kenya's disputed 2007 election. The majority Kikuyus chased away members of the Kalenjin and Luo tribes. The head said that this did not stop the children of different tribes from playing together.

## Lungten Zampa

Thimphu, Bhutan

November 26, 2011



Situated on a dramatic ridge overlooking Thimphu, the capital of the Kingdom of Bhutan, the ancient Dechen Phodrang Monastery (literally, the "Palace of Great Bliss") has 450 students and fifteen teachers. Students wake up at 5:00 a.m., and start the day with one hour of praying before their first classes at 6:30 a.m. At 8:00 a.m. students have breakfast and a short break before resuming classes until noon. Living conditions at the monastery are rudimentary; the children sleep on mats on the floors of the drafty study rooms. Respiratory infections, lice, and scabies are common, and the monastery struggles to provide basic sanitation facilities and adequate food for the boys. Many boys are sent to the monastery because their families cannot afford to feed them; most come aged seven, and stay eight years before transferring to the Monastic College.

## St. Augustine Roman Catholic School

Palm Loop, Montserrat

May 18, 2012



Montserrat is an island in the Caribbean, twelve miles long, with a population of just over five thousand people, mainly of African-Irish descent. Since its foundation in 1875, the Catholic St. Augustine School has been rebuilt four times. The school building was destroyed by hurricanes, in 1899 and 1928. After Hurricane Hugo caused extensive damage in 1989, a major fund-raising effort resulted in the building of a new, multistoried building that was consecrated in 1991. However, the eruption of the island's Soufrière Hills volcano in 1995 destroyed Plymouth entirely, including the school. Evacuated without loss of life, the school relocated to a private house in the island's "safe" zone, away from the volcano, to which new buildings and playgrounds have since been added. Now one of three primary schools on the island, it is attended by 135 pupils.

## Nativity School

Los Angeles

November 10, 2011



This Catholic school, founded by the Sisters of Loretto in 1924, has 330 students. It is situated in a low-income area with a high crime rate. There have been several drive-by shootings near the school, and once a stray bullet went through a school wall. Nativity is private and charges \$210 a month in fees. Sixty-five percent of the students are unable to pay the full amount. The school struggles to pay its teachers. On the day I visited, the school staff was selling nachos to raise money. The children wear two uniforms, one for classes and one for sports. During break time, they wore the latter and played dodgeball. I was happy to see it, as I had read that it has been banned at many American schools for being too violent, along with other "human target" games, including tag.

## Adolfo López Mateos Primary School

Mexico City

May 8, 2014



Twenty-one students in grades one through five are taught in a single classroom in a forty-foot-long train car. The car also contains the school office and library. Until 1994, the school traveled with a service train that repaired the track. The children's parents were railway laborers and the children accompanied them as they worked. When the railroad discontinued the service train, it was parked, and the workers were allowed to live in the cars. The school's sole teacher, who has been in charge for thirty-seven years, also lives in one of the cars. A few of the children work after school as street-food vendors. They have poorer concentration than the students who do not work, and they do not do their homework. When I visited, the students played ball games and wrestled in front of the classroom. A chained guard dog barked throughout the break.

## Wen Chong Primary School

Qingyuan, China

April 9, 2014



The school was established in 1949, immediately after the Communist revolution. There are around nine hundred pupils, aged seven through thirteen, who are taught in classes of forty to forty-five. There is no school cafeteria and children who cannot return home for lunch go to a private nursery, where they are provided with a meal and a bed for their afternoon nap. The students are responsible for keeping the school clean, and classes take turns performing this duty. The students' red scarves mark their affiliation with the Young Pioneers of China, a mass organization run by the Communist Youth League. They are a symbolic reminder of the blood shed by those who gave their lives to the cause of the revolution, and the children are taught to wear them with reverence.

## Aida Boys School

Bethlehem, West Bank

September 8, 2013



The Aida refugee camp, just outside Bethlehem, was set up in 1950 by the United Nations Relief Agency for Palestinians displaced from villages within Israel, and the school was built shortly afterward. The front line between Israelis and Palestinians during the First Intifada (1987–91) fell close to the school, and its walls were thickened to protect its students against bullets. In 2004, the Israelis completed construction of its security wall, just outside the entrance to the school, which the headmaster describes as “a humiliation in front of [the pupils] every day, a kind of restriction on their future.” The third and fourth graders watch the towers to see if the soldiers are looking, and, if not, they throw stones at them. Whenever hostilities flare up with the Israelis, the air fills with tear gas and the headmaster sends everyone home.

## Ugo Foscolo Elementary School

Murano, Venice

March 21, 2014



The Romans first settled Murano, an island in the Venetian Lagoon, in the sixth century. It has been a center of glassmaking since 1291, when glassmakers moved there after being expelled from Venice because of the fire risk posed by their furnaces. Murano glass is still famous and the parents of many of these students are involved in glassmaking. The school occupies the seventeenth-century Palazzo Soranzo. In 2013 the government slashed its budgets and can no longer pay for school cleaners. The school has sixty-four pupils, in grades two through five. There were not enough children to make a grade one class viable, and the school is gradually closing down. When I visited, a team of boys in one year group played soccer against boys from the year below. When the older boys went 4-0 down, they began to take out their frustration on the younger boys.

## Gomalandet Skole

Kristiansund, Norway

April 26, 2012

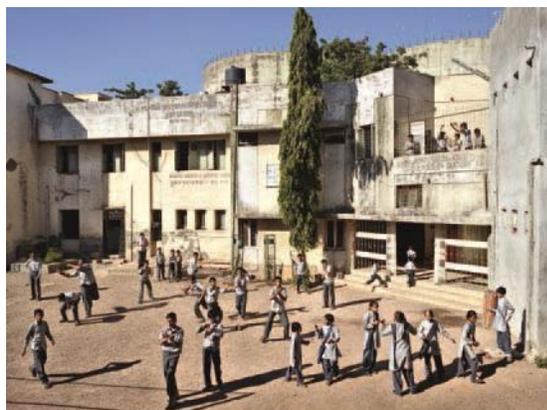


This school was originally intended for children with disabilities, but in the 1980s the Norwegian government decided that children with special needs should be incorporated into standard schools. Many of the pupils are immigrants from Somalia. They are given intensive courses in Norwegian before being integrated into normal classes. One teacher told us that this helps on the playground, "as children who can't express themselves properly are more likely to lash out." Children who have problems with certain subjects are grouped together so that they do not hold back the others. Because it did not freeze over during the last Ice Age, Kristiansund is thought to be the first area of Norway to be settled, around the eighth millennium BCE. In recent years it has become a major hub of the oil and gas industry.

### Virani Deaf and Dumb School

Rajkot, Gujarat, India

November 27, 2012



This school was named “the best working institute for the welfare of handicapped people” by the Gujarati government. Most deaf children in India are not taught sign language, which means that their language development, cognition, and social skills are impaired. Particularly in rural areas, they are often thought to have intellectual disabilities and are treated as outcasts. But at Virani, the teachers take a one-year course to learn sign language, and parents can come to the school to learn to sign as well. There are classes in sewing, knitting, screen-printing, handicrafts, drawing, painting, and gardening. Girls can also do vocational beautician training and learn henna drawing. When I visited, there was an eerie quiet on the playground, as the boys played a catching game over the volleyball net and the girls chatted to each other in sign language.

### Paso Payita

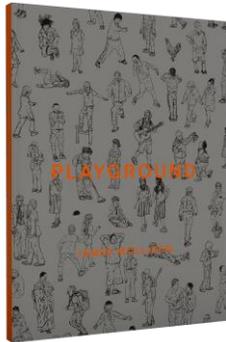
Aramasi, Chuquisaca, Bolivia

August 9, 2011



Situated in a remote area on rough terrain nearly ten thousand feet above sea level, this school has two teachers and thirty-one students aged six through twelve. Many students live in the surrounding hills and have to walk for several miles to get to school. Most people are indigenous Quechua peasant farmers who keep sheep, goats, pigs, and guinea pigs. The sheep’s fleeces are dyed with local wildflowers, spun, and woven into the beautiful fabrics for which the local women have become famous. Half of these students go on to secondary school; of those, fifty percent then go to university in the departmental capital, Santa Cruz. The entire school, except for the few pupils who were ill when I visited, is pictured here. The boys played soccer while the girls played a rough game of tug-of-war without a rope.

## About the book



### *Playground*

Photographs by James Mollison

Introduction by Jon Ronson

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59 four-color images

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For more information about Aperture traveling exhibitions, please contact Exhibitions Manager Annette Booth at (212) 505-5555, ext. 128, or e-mail at [aboath@aperture.org](mailto:aboath@aperture.org).

For more information about Aperture's education programs, please send an email to [education@aperture.org](mailto:education@aperture.org).

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