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The State of Play Area Design - Where is the Research?

Resumé

Playgrounds today take the form they do because that is what adults want to give to the children; not because that is what children want. While there is a pretence at involving children in design it is more often a case of co-opting the children to rubber stamp what the adults are prepared to give. Other research measures children for skills and development levels which are desirable for children but there is no consensus that the goal of playtime is to promote the development of these skills and abilities. Therefore the conclusions of such research are questionable when applied to play areas designed to promote other play values. Adult censorship of play, their subjectivity in determining the purpose of play in play areas, adult convenience and adherence to the latest adult trends and cults in pedagogy and teaching have resulted in play areas with low quality environments and little play interest to the children.

This is a damning criticism of what is often seen as adult “charitable” good works in doing something good for our children. In this paper I will examine the idea of developing new approaches to play area design where the adult concerns are set in perspective with what we know today about growing up in modern societies and what children can like in play areas. Developing a more objective and childhood centred method of evaluating good play area design is the goal.

Children have always played outdoors – there is nothing new in this – however never before have places where people live together been so planned, programmed and defined for specific use. The result has been a severe intrusion into where children can play outside. Yet there is very little research done on where and how children play outdoors – and what is done is being done by a wide range of professionals who do not talk to each other. Little if any of this research is accessible to those who work in cities and schools – making and maintaining the play spaces.

One of the questions is why is there so little research. Play is now an acceptable subject of adult attention – and an area of expertise that has grown extensively in the past several decades. Yet the aspects of playing that have been studied can often be linked to certain issues that the adult society sees as “problems” or where there is some commercial aspect. Playgrounds – for the most a public service – have a problem with commercialisation – or maybe more accurately many adult play professionals have a problem with commercial aspects of outdoor play. In a very generalised sense children continue to be seen as either problem or victims and adult studies of things around children and children’s play tend to be aimed at dealing with children seen in this light – or in the light of children in training to be useful adults.

While we could go on for many hours about why children’s outdoor play has been so ignored it is not my purpose here today. What I would like to do today is to make a case for finding a common ground and community for that little bit of research that is being done.

There are a number of problems with research as it occurs today – aside from the fact that there is so little of it.

One of the problems I have with the much of the research I have seen has to do with the assumptions that have been made about play and playing in the development of the study. For example – in Denmark where I now live there has been much media excitement as well as enthusiasm for many pedagogues over two studies – one in Sweden and one in Norway- that have been published that appear to prove that children playing in nature are better developed than those children who play in an ordinary urban kindergarten playground. The published material around these studies tends to describe the play places in very general terms but appears to neglect aspects of microclimate, wind and other factors. Also the whole aspect of outside influences seems to be poorly controlled for. This is one of the problems with such research – how and what influences where children play and how long they play there. What I miss the most here is some forum in which such research and methodology can be discussed in a positive and helpful way so we can all benefit from developing acceptable methodologies for undertaking research on children's reactions to outdoor play environments.

Also with these studies I have mentioned– I have serious questions about the ways in which it was determined that the children in the nature play areas were better developed – the tests used were ones for physical fitness and concentration. I miss the section where there is some convincing argument and general professional agreement that such outcomes are the purpose of outdoor play.

Let us look at some illustrations of outdoor play in an urban kindergarten yard in Denmark.

The play here has a high concentration of social play and being in groups as well as pretend and fantasy. This is based in the pedagogical theory that the years from 3 to 6 are important years for children to develop social skills, to learn about making friends, to be part of a group, to co-operate and to show empathy and care for others. And the theory is that this happens best when children play together freely. As well they have the benefit of fresh air, exercise and the freedom, from adults that comes with a large outdoor space. There are a number of issues here related to research. One is when doing research on a play yard one should know what the theory is behind the work with the children or the design of the space.

There is also the very big issue of the eyes and brain of the researcher. What we see happening in play are those things we think are important in play – and as we are influenced very much by our own ideas of play and playing when observing children at play. I think we need to be better at developing researchers eye and observation methods that reduce the subjectivity of what we see.

I am not here to criticise some work that was done with only good intentions – but to bring out argumentation for a need for greater professional foundations for how and why one does research in outdoor play. This can only be accomplished by better co-operation and communication between those who do the research, those who work with children on outdoor play yards and those who make playgrounds.

Today the three groups of workers – those who study play as an academic interest, those who work with playing children and those who design and make playgrounds – are not talking to each other.

Even within the academic circles there is little interchange between disciplines. Geographers have done some really good work about how and where children play in urban spaces – but

educators who deal with play in kindergarten and schools rarely access or are aware of this work. One of the reasons is the lack of a recognised medium for publication of research on children's play.

Geographers tend to publish their results in geographical journals, educators in educational journals and psychologists in their professional journals. Journals like **Childhood** from the Norwegian Center for Child research /Sage Publications tend to cover a wider range of professional disciplines. In the May issue the articles are by anthropologists, cultural anthropologist, social workers, psychologists and educators. However the writing style is aimed at university academics – and is not something that a worker in a city parks department will likely ever access. Even if he got his hands on the Journal he would be unlikely to read it

This gap in understanding and ways of expressing ideas and knowledge about children's outdoor play between the professions has meant that while we have an increasing knowledge about play theoretically, the places where children play do not reflect the knowledge we have. The inability of one group of professional to communicate with the other has also limited the development of new ideas around places to play.

The nature playground is hyped as a new idea – but it is fact older than playgrounds themselves – and the phrase “nature playground” has just come to stand for a very inexpensive, poor quality play space for the most. I love nature – but nature has never looked so bleak or boring as on many so-called “nature” playgrounds.

Traditional playground have been the subject of much criticism – but there is little demand in the public for improved play areas. With the advent of safety standards and testing methods all feel that now they can rest – play is safe.

However what is offered to children in most western cities as outdoor play places are fall below what could be done if there was an agreed standard for a quality playground.

Playgrounds are made today for adults by adults. What goes into a playground is based on what adults think should happen when children play there – and for the most the adults who are behind these ideas are people who have little knowledge about the theories and studies on what happens when children play.

There is a big portion of adult censorship in what goes into a playground – what is permitted and what is not permitted. There is also a big portion of adult mistrust in children's abilities, in some lands. In other situations the playground takes the form it does because that is what the adults want to give the children. Giving children things to play with has always been an adult prerogative – and adults, especially some politicians in some lands, like to give playgrounds of a certain formation so they can look good and earn votes amongst their adult voting population.

Much of this takes place with the best intentions – what I would call un-informed good intentions. But as my mother told me many times the road to hell is also paved with good intentions.

The current state of playgrounds and research into children's play outdoors is not good enough. Our children deserve better – our cultural development as human beings requires we do a better job for our children.

One of the problems has been and remains today is the difficulty in developing and agreeing upon a definition of playing. Playing is of such a character and is so close to us as human beings that it is a puzzle to study. I once worked with a woman who used the expression “like wrestling with jelly” – so is it with studying play sometimes. It is immensely difficult to hold onto

insights into play and find the words to record these ideas so others can also benefit. Even more difficult is it to find ways to open the eyes of others to see play and playing in new and different ways. Thirdly the methodological demands of scientific research at times make it difficult to retain the human and unexpected element that is so central to the act of playing. If we can't find some level of agreement on these things how can we begin to discuss what makes a good playground design?

Much of the form of a playground depends on the designer of the space – but all too often the spaces aren't really designed but equipped. Playgrounds are not always the subject of professional design services – making playgrounds, like playground research is done by everybody and anybody – and there is no agreed professional consensus on what makes a good playground – only on what makes a safe piece of playground equipment.

Should playground designers be licensed designers?

On a number of occasions I have been approached by groups who would like to make it mandatory that people who design playground have a “license to design playgrounds.” I have always opposed such a move – as my experience with licensing landscape architects was that the move made a fine old boy's club but did not improve the practise of landscape architecture – and my fear was that such an attempt would not in any way improve play experiences for children while limiting who could put their initials or professional stamp on the plan.

To improve playground we need to start by talking amongst professions – educators, play experts, architects and landscape architects, psychologists, anthropologists, social workers, community development workers and so forth. And we need to do this is a positive way – not to establish any special niche or to further any one professions ownership of knowledge – but to bring about better quality outdoor play experiences for the children.

A forum for researchers in playground design

My goal in this presentation is to start the idea of a creating a forum for all those who are interested in research on outdoor play and play area design to be able to communicate, to have a focus for discussion and in the longer run to establish some consensus on research methodology, and on what can, might and could happen as well as should happen when children go out to play. This group could be a subsection of a larger organisation or institution – it is not to create more organisations or add to the confusion of which play institution stands for what but to initiate efforts to find out what is known, what research is being done, find a way that this information can be made accessible to those professions who design for children's play and those who work with children out on the play yard. The goal is to improve children's play – and I hope along the way we can also improve the professionalism of the adults who study and work with children's outdoor play.