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ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS
VS
TRADITIONAL PLAYGROUNDS

by

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Abstract

A comparison between the traditional American playground with the adventure playground clearly shows the superiority of the latter in meeting the play needs of children. This study explores the history and characteristics of both types of playgrounds. Research also focuses on children's play needs and how playground design affects these needs. Adventure playgrounds as public school playgrounds offer a wider range of play experiences than can the traditional school playground and can enhance academic learning. Inservice training for educators can facilitate an understanding of the concept of the adventure playground and the teacher's role as play leader. Enlisting community support and involvement may lead to the use of the playground after school hours and during the summer which would result in maximum benefit for the children.

Chapter One

Introduction

Problem Statement

How can adventure playgrounds more successfully meet the play needs of elementary school children than the standard American playgrounds?

The design of most school playgrounds has remained basically unchanged since the early 1900s. Today, as in the past, they consist of steel structures set in concrete. The deficiencies of these play areas, in terms of their potential for providing for desirable play experiences, are numerous (Miller, 1972).

This study serves to show how adventure playgrounds stimulate a wider variety of play and more originality in play themes.

Rationale

Outdoor play areas have been traditionally designed for the elementary school age child. However, the needs and interests of this age group should be better reflected in more creative outdoor environments (Miller, 1972).

According to Miller (1972) play areas need to be studied and improved because of the great influence they have on childrens' lives. There needs to be greater consideration given to the kinds of experiences the outdoors can provide.

There has been little change in design of the standard playground. It looks similar to those of fifty years ago (Fjeldsted, 1972). Both Aaron and Winawer (1965) and Fjeldsted (1972) agree that traditional playground concepts offer insufficient answers to modern needs for children's play areas. They provide little scope for imagination, exploration, and creativity.

According to Frost (1979), public school playgrounds are in a great state of need. The traditional design provides for equipment geared to developing motor skills in the middle elementary age group. This type of playground makes no provision for the play needs of the five through eight year old student.

In fact, Frost and Klein (1979) state that such playgrounds are hazardous, inadequately equipped and inappropriate for children under eight years old.

Frost and Henniger (1979) conclude that the developmental play needs of children are not being met by standard American playgrounds. American children spend too little time on playgrounds which offer challenges and a variety of activities.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this study to show how adventure playgrounds more successfully meet the play needs of children by providing opportunities which stimulate and exercise mind and body in a manner not possible on traditional playgrounds.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study is to compare adventure playgrounds with conventional playgrounds. It is the further purpose of this study to show that the play needs of children are better met by the adventure playground.

During the course of this study, the history and characteristics of adventure playgrounds and traditional playgrounds will be examined. The research will also focus on the play needs of children and how playground design affects these needs. Implications for educators in capitalizing upon designs which most successfully meet these needs will be discussed.

Traditional Playgrounds

Until the late 1800s, most Americans lived in rural settings. Children played an active role in family life. They helped care for livestock, tend the crops and many other chores necessary to make a living. These activities helped prepare them for adulthood. Natural play spaces abounded in these rural settings. Children could observe nature

firsthand, climb trees and explore their surroundings.

With the Industrial Revolution came the trend of urbanization and with it the problem of creating special places for children to play (Fjeldsted, 1980). Urbanization caused the disappearance of natural play spaces making it necessary to build playgrounds (Vance, 1982). According to Beckwith (1982) playgrounds were built in the late 1800s to get children off the streets. The playgrounds were designed to provide some kind of physical development and promote citizenship. Aaron and Winawer (1965) contend that further modernization of cities has led to the creation of playgrounds to keep the children from the dangers of progress. Before World War II, children played in vacant lots and at construction sites where they would spend hours digging and building. Adults decided these areas were unsafe for children and built fenced-in playgrounds (Frost & Klein, 1979). According to Aaron and Winawer (1965), playgrounds today have the same design as playgrounds of the 1870s.

Aaron and Winawer (1965), Dattner (1969), and Hill (1980) agree in their description of traditional American playgrounds. They depict them as being bleak, open spaces paved with concrete or asphalt usually surrounded by a tall fence. Equipment usually includes swings, a slide, see-saws and perhaps a merry-go-round or jungle gym. The structures are made of metal and are cemented in place. There is usually no shelter from sun or rain, no drinking fountains or bathrooms (Aaron & Winawer, 1965). Such a design was easy to build, practically indestructible and virtually maintenance free. The majority of public school playgrounds provide this same concrete/steel design for elementary school age children (Frost & Klein, 1979). Walston (1974) and Frost (1979) agree that such playgrounds allow for only one form of play--exercise, and that each piece of equipment creates a one-dimensional play experience.

Most conventional playgrounds can accommodate no more than thirty-five children in active play (Aaron & Winawer, 1965). Dattner (1969), Frost and Klein (1979), and Frost (1979) view traditional

playgrounds as hazardous, unsafe places for children to play. They cite falls onto hard surfaces, poorly manufactured and installed equipment and lack of proper maintenance as contributing factors.

Elementary school playgrounds have been designed for middle elementary school age children (grades 3-6). The height of slides and height and wide bar spacing of overhead ladder climbers are dangerous when used by younger primary children (grades k-2).

Adventure Playgrounds

When adults remember play experiences, no mention is made of play on playground equipment such as swings and slides. Adults remember swinging on ropes or vines (often into a stream or pond), building forts or clubhouses with friends or walking fences and walls (Vance, 1982). These latter types of activities can be enjoyed today on most adventure playgrounds.

The first planned adventure playground was erected at Emdrup near Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943. C. Th. Sorensen, an architect who had designed many playgrounds, noticed that children enjoyed playing with scrap materials left on construction sites

rather than on established playgrounds (Frost & Klein, 1979). This observation led to the creation of the first adventure playgrounds, sometimes called a junk playground. It was a great success and still exists today. Sorensen had the site excavated and banked the dirt up on all sides. A wire fence was placed atop the embankment and rose and hawthorn bushes were planted which formed a natural border surrounding the playground. A play hut with bathrooms and a play leader's office and storage room for tools was erected. A play leader was hired and the playground opened to welcome children (Bengtsson, 1972).

Lady Allen of Hurtwood introduced adventure playgrounds to Great Britain in 1946 after visiting the Emdrup facility. The playgrounds of London were organized in spaces left where buildings had been destroyed by bombs. The idea caught on and many adventure playgrounds were created in London. In 1962 the London Adventure Playground Association was formed (Bengtsson, 1972).

Adventure playgrounds were introduced into the United States in 1950 by McCall's magazine. It was

their contribution to the mid-century White House Conference on Children and Youth. Adventure playgrounds are now found in seven of the United States, most of them in Illinois, Wisconsin and California. Because of the mild year-round climate, California cities contain the best examples (Vance, 1982). The American Adventure Playground Association was formed in 1976 by a group of park and recreation officials, educators and commissioners in Southern California. In 1977, this organization recognized sixteen adventure playgrounds in America (Frost & Klein, 1979). The purpose of the Association is to provide information about adventure playgrounds and to promote their concept. The concept has been slow to catch on in America in part because of fear of injury and liability. Safety records of such playgrounds, however, are excellent. Aside from scratches, cuts, bruises and fractures, there have been few serious injuries (Frost & Klein, 1979). According to Vance (1982) the safety record for these playgrounds during the past ten years has proven that they can be safely conducted. The same source also noted

that the number of children involved is much greater than on conventional playgrounds. Rudolph (1974) states that when the challenge of creative play is presented to children, they do not need to invent destructive and daring activities.

Adventure playgrounds have been described as places in which children are given free rein to develop their abilities. According to Rudolph (1974) the idea of adventure playgrounds is hard to sell because of its untidy appearance. They have sometimes been called junk playgrounds because the children play and build with scrap lumber and metal and cast-off objects of all sorts. The junk becomes forts, huts, tire swings and other projects all constructed by the children (Stone, 1970).

Most adventure playgrounds are modeled after the first playground at Emdrup. Sizes may vary with some spread out over many acres while others are no larger than a city lot. Frost and Klein (1979) suggest that more than four acres would be too difficult to supervise effectively. The area should be fenced in with gates that can be locked when the supervisor is not there. Board or brick fences and

shrubbery help to provide privacy for children as well as hiding the "junk" from the community. Facilities usually include a play hut with a large open room in case of rain or cold weather. Bathroom facilities and storage areas for tools and scrap materials are included as well as an office for the play leader (Hill, 1980). Part of the grounds area is set up for construction sites on which children can build forts or huts as well as furniture for them. They also build challenging play equipment such as tire swings or rope climbers. Other areas are set aside for garden plots where the children can grow flowers or vegetables. Some sites have an area where animals are raised and cared for. The playground also may have an area designated for cooking. The children learn to kindle fires and cook on them (Frost & Klein, 1979). These activities are carried out with the help of the play leader.

All adventure playgrounds have one or two play leaders depending on their size. They are the key to a successful, safe play experience for children (Frost & Klein, 1979). In the United States the

play leader's role and salary can be compared to that of a recreation director or camp counselor. The role of the play leader is a varied one. Of greatest importance is an understanding of the concept of adventure playgrounds as being a place in which children design and build their own play spaces. The role is essentially one of non-interference except as needed for safety or as requested by the children. An understanding of creativity is necessary. The play leader teaches children how to use the tools and checks the structures as they are being built for safety. Teaching children to put away tools and help care for the area is also a function of the play leader (Rudolph, 1974). According to Mason (1982) the play leader should not dominate the playground. They should intervene only when necessary. They need to be able to foresee and prevent trouble as well as stimulate interest and channel energies.

Public relations is an important facet of the job. The ability to communicate articulately with parents and other community members is essential, especially when explaining how the playground works

and in enlisting support for it. The play leader makes it possible for the adventure playground to be a place which children can call their own; one in which adults do not interfere but provide assistance in order to help children achieve self-set goals (Vance, 1982).

Play Needs

Miller (1972) and Frost and Klein (1979) attest to the universality of play. Records since the beginning of time have noted the importance of play to intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. Understanding what play can and should be to children and society is essential because play is the cornerstone of human development (Aaron & Winawer, 1965).

Research shows that there is no single definition of play. Bengtsson (1972) views play as being fundamentally important to the education process and the birthright of every child. Dattner (1969) states that the process, not the product of play is important even though all play is concerned with achievement of goals whether consciously stated or not. The same source agrees with Miller (1972)

and Bruya (1983) that play is the process by which children determine how the world works. Through play a child recreates the world around him and begins to understand it (Weininger, 1979).

Friedberg (1975) and Hewes and Beckwith (1975) divide play into three general categories: physical development, social interaction, and cognitive or learning play. Through physical play, children are constantly challenging and testing themselves to discover their abilities and limitations. They need a variety of objects and surfaces with which to work. They need to be able to manipulate and change their environments as their capabilities change.

Social play involves imaginative and fantasy play. Children through role playing extend the real limits of themselves and their world. Play areas should foster and stimulate a child's imagination. Another facet of social play is interaction with other children. The play environment and materials should promote cooperation between children (a tire swing that can hold two or three children at the same time). The children need to discover themselves in relation to others. Spaces designed

for small group play as well as for larger group cooperation should be available (Hewes & Beckwith, 1975).

Children are learning whenever they play. In order to promote cognitive play, children need a wide range of play opportunities. Children need to make decisions and test consequences in a controlled setting. They need to learn to trust their judgement through problem solving situations. The research by Aaron and Winawer (1965) and Miller (1972) shows that play is essential in the maturation process. The desire to become an adult is reflected in children's play as they act out adult roles such as firemen, mothers, teachers and others. Providing opportunities for this type of play brings about desirable growth and development for adulthood (Miller, 1972).

Play Environments

In order to foster development of children to their full potential as adults there is a need to design environments better suited to the play needs of children. Beckwith (1982) agrees that playground designs must consider and use insights gained from

child development research. In the past, children have had little to say about the design of playgrounds. Miller (1972), Walston (1974) and Fjeldsted (1980) concur that children should play an active role in designing, constructing and maintaining outdoor play areas. Many conventional playgrounds are unused because once children have explored the fixed equipment with its one dimensional play purpose, they become bored (Fjeldsted, 1980). Aaron and Winawer (1965) see the adults' concept of children's play as being too narrow. This concept is reflected in the traditional play environment which provides only for physical play. There is no provision for imagination, creation and cooperation. Bengtsson (1972) agrees with Aaron and Winawer (1965) that traditional playgrounds stifle imagination and creativity. There is nothing for the children to explore or discover. Wallach (1983) expresses concern that the traditional design contributes to little-used playgrounds and to misuse of the play equipment. Once children have learned all they can about the equipment, they begin to use it in ways

not designed for it, thus endangering themselves and others. The lesson learned on conventional playgrounds is that the man-made world is ugly, dull and empty of satisfaction. The implications for these attitudes as children grow into adulthood is not good (Dattner, 1969).

Wilkinson (1980) describes standard playgrounds as being rigid, non-manipulable and unable to change with the changing needs of the child. The same author views the adventure playgrounds as being innovative play areas which provide children with opportunities to explore, create, and to change the environment as it suits their needs. Frost and Klein (1979) agree that adventure playgrounds provide children with learning environments that cannot be duplicated by a static playground. In the opinion of Hill (1980), adventure playgrounds provide great potential for individual development and is a concept that has no equal. Rudolph (1974) sees this type of play area as an exciting outdoor classroom where abstractions become realities. Children discover how to build huts, tables or hang a tire swing. The importance of these discoveries

is that they are made by the children on their own terms. They are free to go where their imaginations take them.

Traditional playgrounds fulfill only one facet of children's play needs - the physical - and that only in part. Adventure playgrounds encompass the total realm of child's play needs - physical, social and cognitive. Fjeldsted (1980) conducted an experiment in which four young children were observed at play on first a standard playground and then on an adventure playground. The conclusions drawn showed that the adventure playground provided more effective play experiences and play was more stimulating. According to Vance (1982), a study by the American Adventure Playground Association has shown that adventure playgrounds are well accepted by the public and that many more children choose to play on them than on conventional ones.

Implications for Educators

Public school playgrounds are the most common kind of play areas for children. These playgrounds have remained unchanged for the past half-century. This deserves attention by educators (Miller, 1972).

Yerkes (1982) believes that educators are failing to examine the implications of outdoor play experiences for the enhancement of teachers' goals. A research study conducted in 1980 at Illinois University showed that participation in play experiences on an adventure playground helped to significantly improve children's visual-motor integration. Yerkes (1982) points out that adventure playgrounds may be used as a type of outdoor resource center to reinforce fundamental learning tasks. Not only does it capitalize on the natural exploratory learning behavior of children, the design serves to stimulate achievements useful in academic readiness.

Educators believe that children learn better when learning is fun (Poole & Poole, 1982). Effective teachers also know that children who take part in designing and caring for their classroom environment are more receptive to learning and behavior problems are reduced. This same idea can carry over to the outdoor environment created by adventure playgrounds.

Summary

It becomes evident upon review of the literature researched, that play needs of children are many and varied. Play is life itself to children. The process rather than the product is important. Stimulating play experiences allow children to examine themselves and their environment in an atmosphere of freedom. The adults' role in children's play is one of providing expanding opportunities so that children can learn from their own activities and observation (Almy, 1984).

Playground design must be one which allows for creativity and exploration. A comparison of the standard American playground with the adventure playground clearly shows the superiority of the latter in more successfully meeting the play needs of children. The benefits of involving children in the construction and care of such a playground have been discussed.

The implications for educators are clear. Adventure playgrounds as public school playgrounds can meet the play needs of children and enhance academic learning as well.

Chapter Three

Conclusions and Recommendations

Children are important. They represent the future of this country. Play is the avenue by which children explore themselves and learn to communicate their ideas and feeling with others. Time and energy spent in creating spaces for children to grow and develop to their full potential will be time wisely invested.

Playgrounds which allow children to learn through creative, imaginative play are needed. The adventure playground is one which fosters the natural learning style of children. Unlike traditional play areas which provide only for the physical aspects of play, these adventure playgrounds, under the guidance of a play leader, allow children free rein to explore, create, and cooperate with others.

Conclusions

Research has shown the superiority of adventure playgrounds over traditional playgrounds in meeting the play needs of children. Since most public school grounds are patterned after the standard

American playground consisting of swings, slides and see-saws set in concrete, it can be concluded that they are not meeting the play needs of children who frequent them.

There is a clear need for revision, for updating and converting existing school playgrounds into adventure playgrounds. Existing equipment such as slides that are too high or swings made of metal and set in concrete should be dismantled and removed from the playground. Parts of these structures might be used as scrap materials to be used by the children in building their own physically challenging structures.

Asphalt or concrete surfaces could be used as a foundation for a play hut or storage room for materials or tools. The remaining play area should then be mapped out making provision for suitable areas for building, sand and water play, and gardening activities.

Public school teachers, through their training and experience, have the necessary qualifications to function as effective play leaders. They are also well equipped to communicate articulately to parents

and communities, the worthwhile qualities of such a play area and its implications for enhancing teachers' goals. Inservice training for teachers and aides can be an effective tool in ensuring that both the concept of the adventure playground and the role of the play leader are understood and implemented.

School Parent Teacher Association organizations and/or community civic groups can play an instrumental role in raising public awareness of the need for change. They can also help to raise funds and solicit donations of materials or skills needed to build an adventure playground.

Recommendations

An adventure playground as a public school playground can be used throughout the school year for free play time and as a resource learning center for children. The possibilities for learning and creating are numerous. Once constructed, it could also be used after school hours and during summers as a community playground.

In order to promote awareness and interest of the benefits in establishing an adventure playground

as the school playground, it will be necessary to inform people about it.

The Parent Teacher Association can be instrumental in helping with the project. A group of interested parents and teachers could then seek approval and permission from the school board. Once permission has been obtained, it will be necessary to raise funds to build a fence and play hut on the site. It may be that the school board would be willing to help fund the project. If not, an appeal to the community and local merchants for materials and help in construction can be made. A survey sent to parents might also be helpful in obtaining information about willingness to donate materials and skills. Local high school vocational classes are another source that could provide help in planning and building the playground.

Individuals who communicate well with the public might give talks at the various civic clubs to stimulate interest and ask for aid with the project. Community awareness and involvement in planning and construction of the playground will make it more successful. This may also lead to the

use of the playground after school hours and during the summer if funds for a play leader's salary could be assured.

During school hours the classroom teachers can function as the play leaders. After school and/or during the summers, the playground could be used by the community with a paid play leader on duty (possibly a teacher if one is interested). The use of the playground after school hours and during the summer would be subject to the local school board ruling and the cooperation and agreement between community and school in the use of the property.

Commitments should be obtained from local businesses to donate materials for use on the playground. Items such as large spools and poles can be obtained from the telephone or power companies. Truck stops, gas stations and tractor dealers are excellent sources for old tires and perhaps even an old vehicle that could be stripped and made safe for play. Hardware stores might donate scrap lumber, tools, nails, bolts, rope and large crates or boxes. The school cafeteria or

local restaurants may be willing to give cans and old pots and pans for mud play.

Local farmers or agriculture classes may help in discing and plowing land for the garden plots or to create an area for sand and water play.

People need to be informed and interested before they will donate their time, skills and materials. Enthusiastic, committed persons are needed to stimulate the interest. Use of the media such as local radio stations and newspapers can be helpful in creating public awareness.

Summary

The purpose of this study has been to compare traditional playgrounds with adventure playgrounds in meeting the play needs of children. The research clearly shows that adventure playgrounds provide a wider range of play experiences and capitalize on children's natural learning processes.

Public school playgrounds can enhance play experiences and provide a learning resource center if they are converted into an adventure playground.

Teachers have many play leader qualities and through inservice training can function very effectively in this role on the playground.

It has been recommended that both school board and community become informed about and involved in the planning and implementation of the project. A plan should be worked out so that the school would use the playground during the school day and the community could fund a play leader's position so that the playground would be used after school hours and during the summer. In this way, the children would receive maximum benefit from the playground.

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