

Adult Perspectives on Structured vs. Unstructured Play in Early Childhood Environmental Education

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Submitted February 12, 2017; accepted July 12, 2017

ABSTRACT

In this research report, the authors explore an early childhood center as it transitions from a traditional playground to an outdoor classroom. Herein, the first phase of this qualitative research project is introduced and a central finding of adult perspectives is explored. The tension inherent in the various adult perspectives concerning the extent of structured lessons versus free play is exhibited. This finding has resonance within the larger literature concerning open ended and pedagogical play and further reveals the differing goals for children's outdoor experiences from teacher, administrator, and parent perspectives.

Key Words: Young Children, Outdoor Play, Open Ended Play, Pedagogical Play, Adult Perspectives

In this article, we explore the perspectives of adults concerning outdoor experiences and play of children at an early childhood center. The data explored here forms the first part of a larger study in which play and outdoor learning is being investigated as the early childhood center is transitioning from a traditional playground to an outdoor classroom. This report focuses on the initial phase of research and provides early insights into the larger question of how children engage in outdoor play.

The early childhood center sits on the campus of a mid-western state university in the United States and has approximately 150 children ranging in age from 18 months to 6 years old. At the time this first phase of research was conducted, the center was transitioning from a traditional playground with swings and slides to a more intentional outdoor learning environment with natural building materials, garden plots, logs for balancing and stacking, and a stage. We were curious how this change in space would impact the ways children played and learned in the outdoors, and how the role of adult interactions and perspectives impacts outdoor learning for young children. A central concern of ours throughout the research has been the interplay between play-focused learning and more structured and intentional learning embedded in the outdoor learning environment and how children and adults perceive and make sense of these two elements of education.

We provide a short review of the literature concerning early childhood outdoor education and an explanation of our research methods and process. Subsequently, we explore a salient finding that emerged from the parent questionnaire and teacher interviews and which provides interesting points of divergence between parent and teacher perspectives of structured v. unstructured play.

Literature review

Our study finds relevance within a larger discourse concerning open-ended play v. pedagogical play and particular critiques of open-ended play along cognitive and culturally relevant practices (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). Pedagogical play consists of multiple forms of intentional educative activity, all of which offer potential meaningful opportunities to engage children in developing awareness and understanding of their world (Woods, 2010; Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). There is a tension therefore between advocates for less structured outdoor experiences and those that have an intentional educative purpose. As Cutter-Mackenzie (2007) stresses, “the practice of environmental education requires a delicate pedagogical balance of knowledge, values, and action in the experience of environmental education in early childhood education” (p. 1996). This balance requires educators to consider pedagogical, cognitive, emotional, and physical responses of children to either open-ended or pedagogical play and recognition that environmental learning necessitates both teacher directed and unguided experiences in outdoor spaces (Tranter & Malone, 2004). Inherent in these ideas is the exploration of the importance of intentionality of adult engagement with children to support the learning process. For the purposes of this study we are interested in research that demonstrates centrality of adult interactions with children during outdoor play and how adults perceive their role in these experiences.

This intersection of adult perspectives and children’s experiences in outdoor learning presupposes that the outdoor environment itself plays a role in the learning of children. In this regard, the perspectives of adults in the creation of outdoor environments can affect the subsequent experiences of children, (Moore & Wong, 1997; Kiewra & Veselack, 2016) who read schoolyard landscapes recognizing dominant adult values (Gamson Danks, 2014). Tranter and Malone (2004) share this concern for how adult oriented goals affect children’s learning in their inquiry of the use of space by children related specifically to school grounds. Along these lines, the structured outdoor environment may create tension between adult oriented goals and children’s interests and potential for creative engagement with nature (Johnson, 2000) or conversely, may foster keen interest in natural environments. The present study offers a unique exploration of how the outdoor environment can affect both the practice of educators and the environmental experiences, social learning, and engagement of children. As we detail below, our exploration begins with investigating the adult attitudes and perspectives for outdoor learning as the transition to an outdoor classroom commenced.

METHODS

Within this first phase of data collection, open-ended parent questionnaires and one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators were conducted. For both the questionnaires and interviews we sought to learn the perceptions and attitudes of adults concerning early childhood outdoor experiences. As such, we were interested in early experiences of these adults and how that might impact their present day attitudes. During analysis, we began by exploring through open coding first the questionnaires and subsequently the interviews. We developed a master code list for both sets of data and then returned to the data to reread transcripts for accuracy. We examined the codes for patterns of correlation and created categories of affiliated codes. From these categories we looked for relationships among them to generate themes that emerged out of the data.

FINDINGS

In comparing parent responses with teacher responses, a central finding emerged concerning varying attitudes of structured v. unstructured outdoor play. This finding offers insight into adult perspectives concerning outdoor learning for children at the early childhood center. The majority of parents responded that they were indeed hoping that the new outdoor classroom would create more opportunities for intentional environmental learning. Below are some representative examples of parent responses to questions from the questionnaire related to expectations for outdoor experiences for their children at the early childhood center:

“Not a free-for-all, not let them loose, organized games”

“Exploring. Learning to respect and care for the natural world. Exposure, curriculum to local plants and animal species.”

“Playing, but also some structured learning as in a classroom.”

“Learning about nature. Hands-on environmental education.”

“Hands-on interaction with both the familiar and the strange would be great. Not just outdoors as recreation space, but as a living space of plants, animals, rocks, etc.”

Within these statements there is concern for time spent playing, but also guided activities that foster environmental awareness and concern. This was less a concern from the teacher perspective. Environmental awareness and intentional instruction in ecological learning was not a primary goal for teachers at the center. This could be related to lack of training or inclination, although there was a near universal awareness of the importance of having outside experiences that were unstructured and peer focused. This stemmed from teachers own experiences as children in which they were often unaccompanied by adults as they rambled around forests and fields. Referring to these memories, one teacher explained that, “we lived on a farm. It [outdoor play] wasn’t anything structured by any means. We lived by a river. We went down to the river by ourselves. We were never supervised (laughter), down at the river. We just played down there. It was a shallow river, but, yeah, we spent a lot of time outdoors. Probably way more than kids do now.” One of the administrators had a similar set of experiences as a child, stating, “I grew up on a farm that had 480 acres, and as long as I could see the silo, I was free to be. I had to be home when the yard light came on.” These stories from childhood were pervasive among this group of teachers and there is apparent a connection between these experiences and their eventual concerns as practitioners when discussing the structured environment of outdoor play.

In response to questions related to the eventual transition to an outdoor learning environment there was some apprehension from the perspective of teachers. Part of this concern stemmed from concerns of continuations of classroom learning in the outdoors. “They want an outdoor classroom, but I feel like there also needs to be time where it’s not so structured. I feel it’s very structured.” Another teacher likewise shared this concern by stressing that “hopefully, they will have more purposeful interactions and learning will take place. That’s all great, well, and wonderful, but I think that there needs to be a space where structured learning isn’t taking place.” As a way of explaining a lack of intentional pedagogical play, a third teacher explained that as a child “you’re not relying on an adult to help you learn or tell you what to do. I think it’s really important, especially with kids to just step back and watch them do their thing.”

An interesting counter position among staff at the center came from a newly hired administrator, who contends it is important to stress, “that this is an outdoor classroom. We’re not building a new playground. That it’s not a downtime. That it’s not a time that you [teachers] get to just sit back and watch them run. There’s intentional learning going on and intentional activities.” This would appear to suggest that there is foreseeable tension ahead as the playground transitions to an outdoor classroom.

REFLECTIONS

At this point, we are left wondering how all this will impact education in outdoor environments for the children at the center. How can we reconcile the need for intentional environmental education with the need for unstructured childhood play? There are notable contrasts between the goals and expectations among parents, teachers, and administrators that will play out in the outdoors. The concern of teachers that the new space would be too structured and require more adult supervision or intrusion is juxtaposed with the parental expressions of a need for intentional environmental lessons that encourage children to develop appreciation and awareness of the natural world. How can environmental education be integrated within a play-based curriculum?

These are tensions and questions at the heart of our continued research and which have aided us in developing particular strategies for data collection that enlarges our awareness of these dynamics. Because we envision

qualitative research as an iterative process, we are guided by this early investigation of adult perspectives. As such, we will continue to account for adult perceptions but will additionally bring in children's ideas and views. To better understand these issues in a holistic way, the next phase of research will include observations of children in the existing playground, and subsequent observations, interviews with teachers and children, and questionnaires of parents after the transition to an outdoor classroom. Thus, we will continue to explore this dynamic between various forms of outdoor play and learning. Yet, what adults talk about in questionnaires and interviews will be supplemented through observations and interviews with children, allowing us to explore the actual practice of outdoor education and gain insight into what children make of it.

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