

Reimagining Recess! Abstract

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Play is intrinsic for children, and critical for physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights declares play as a right of every child. Outdoor play has been found to foster child development and promote physical activity (Miller, 1989). Despite this, surveys show that children today are spending significantly less time playing outdoors than their parents' generation (Clements, 2004). This, in addition to parent complaints regarding excessive rules at and prevalence of conflicts during recess at several Ithaca elementary schools, created an opportunity for the implementation of loose parts play. Loose parts play offers children the chance to play in an unstructured manner, with minimal adult interference and direction. Researchers have found that loose parts play increases children's playfulness and self concept (Bundy, 2008) and promotes positive social behaviors (Flannigan, 2017). The purpose of this project was to understand the impact and implications of loose parts play at recess locally.

The Reimagining Recess! project was initiated through the work of Dr. Wilkinson and community partners. Funding through the The Ithaca Public Education Initiative Connecting Classrooms Grant was used for support staff training in playwork principles, purchase of storage sheds, and provision of loose parts play materials at two elementary schools. We worked with Dr. Wilkinson on instrument development and data collection to evaluate the the impact of changing recess in this way. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected during recess periods between May 31, 2018 and June 20, 2018. For collection of quantitative data, a modified version of the System for Observing Children's Activity and Relationships During Play (mSOCARP) form and adult observation data sheets were used to show types of play, group size, social interactions, and conflict occurrences. Qualitative data was derived from detailed written narratives from observations of a child that was engaged with loose parts. Statistical analyses were completed on all quantitative data and qualitative data was reviewed to identify common themes.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the collected quantitative data and themes were developed from the narratives. Children were more often found playing in groups than playing alone when engaging with the loose parts. Activity levels were classified as lying down, sitting, standing, walking, vigorous, or sliding/swinging. A majority of children were walking or engaging in vigorous activity as opposed to sedentary behavior. Data on conflict at recess showed that the frequency of no conflict was significantly greater than the frequency of conflict occurring. 77% of play with loose parts was categorized as constructive, gross motor, and sensory play. Among children playing with loose parts, 82% of their interactions were prosocial behaviors (verbal and physical sportsmanship) and only 5% of observations recorded antisocial

interactions (verbal and physical conflict). Reimagining Recess! has had a positive impact on the children and adults at these schools and it has been well-received by children and administrators involved with the project.

The American Occupational Therapy Association identifies recess as a place in which Occupational therapists (OT's) can work with children to promote health and engagement in meaningful activity. However, school-based OT's typically focus on classroom occupations. Our research reinforces the importance of child-directed play and reframes the lens through which OT's view, facilitate, and use play therapeutically in schools. These concepts can be applied not just in therapy sessions for children who need extra support, but for all children. State level initiatives have promoted a model of Multi-tiered Systems of Support to facilitate health and development for all children and reduce the need for special education services. This project can be seen as a tier 1 intervention which is universal and targets all students, including those with social difficulties at school, by increasing cooperative play and conflict management, and decreasing negative social interactions on the playground.

Loose parts play is practical, adaptable, and transferable. It can be done anywhere, anytime, and is inexpensive. OT's are experts at adapting occupations to fit the unique needs of individuals; loose parts hold endless possibilities for upgrades, downgrades, and creative activity manipulations to benefit any child. The discovered evidence has the potential to change how therapists, parents, teachers, and anyone else interacting with children view play and offers a positive play opportunity for all children, worldwide.

References

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