

Abstract

As children spend majority of their time indoors in sedentary activities, their outdoor play experiences become daunting and children reduce their connections to nature. Less time outdoors creates less free play and their outdoor play experiences, as limited as they have become, are crucial for their development. Sometimes considered the experts of their children, parents have become lost in the voices when it is time to make decisions about children's play at institutions. This article aims to explore the neglected voices of parents when considering children's outdoor play environments. This study not only adds to the growing research in the importance of promoting outdoor play and the impact the designs of spaces may have on children's learning, but also provides a connection between children's outdoor play at home, at school, and in the community. This study represents perspectives of mothers living in a small town in Canada, where their perspectives are frequently not considered in literature. Results suggested that adults have leadership over children's outdoor play and children may currently be limited in play outdoors and action may need to be taken to ensure that the perspectives and values of educators, parents, community stakeholders, and children are equally promoted.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perspectives of the designs of their children's outdoor play environments and the factors they felt may influence the children's actions and behaviours. This study hoped to gain insight into what parents' value in their children's outdoor play environments, how they feel the design influences play, and to possibly encourage institutions to understand the parents' knowledge and include their voices more when designing spaces. The overreaching research question was "What are parents' perspectives of how the physical design of outdoor play environments may influence children's play?"

Questions to consider:

1. What elements of outdoor play environments do parents find significant for their children's spaces?
2. How included parents felt in the designing process of outdoor play environments?
3. What does an outdoor environment need to best support their children?

Literature Review

The concept of "Free Play"

The level in which children are exposed to outdoor play environments may greatly impact the validity of calling outdoor play 'free play'. As a result, environments that promote free play may also treat children as capable beings and provide opportunities to develop autonomy in their play. Freedom can be a sense of privacy, and a time for exploration and self-discovery. In the early years' children may be viewed as competent and capable learners, yet the outdoor play environments set up for children that have been researched in these studies, may not promote the freedom to explore themselves, others and the environment. As such, the research question aims to discover how parents feel their children's outdoor play environments may influence children's opportunities to play freely.

The Environment

Children have the innate ability to read environments to learn and navigate from them. If adults can learn to read environments the way children can they may use the environment as an ally to guide children's learning (Callaghan 2013). The way a play environment is set up may influence children's desires to pursue challenges, discover learning opportunities and develop novel connections with the environment. However, children's outdoor play environments may be limited to the environments provided to them by adults. This is supported by the literature, these designed environments tend to be manufactured, and how these environments are set for children may influence how children play (Beate & Sandseter, 2009).

Adult Influence

The literature identified how adults may have the ability to influence children's play and may not discover how adult's views may consciously or subconsciously influence children's play (Terada, Ermilova & Kinoshita, 2018, p. 172). Children may learn from other children and adults, they rely on socialization to enhance their play time, discover new ideas, and to increase the complexity of their learning. It could be argued that the literature suggested adults may need to consider their interactions with children and try to limit interrupting children's play outdoors in order to ensure that children are being supported in their learning. Children also need the freedom to explore their play on their own. Consequently, this study investigates how participants feel their children's play may be determined by how adults set up their environments

Methodology

Research Design

The research design is a case study as the prevailing interest is parents experiences with their children's outdoor play. A case study is an in depth exploration of a bounded system, individuals separated out of research in terms of time, place, or physical boundaries, based on extensive data collection (Creswell & Geutterman, 2019).

Instrument

The instrument in which the researcher collected the data was through semi-structured individual interviews lasting fifteen minutes maximum with eleven official questions as followed:

1. Tell me about yourself and your child(ren).
2. What outdoor areas does your child play in?
3. How do you think your child plays differently between these areas?
4. What do you have in the outdoor play area at home that is different than your child's play area at school?
5. What characteristics do you consider when choosing outdoor play areas for your child?
6. What would you add or change in your outdoor play area at home to create new ways to play?
7. What would you add or change in your child's outdoor play area at school to create new ways to play?
8. Who do you feel has the most influence in the design of your child's outdoor play area at school?
9. How do you feel you influence your child's outdoor play experiences?
10. How might adult's interactions with your child during outdoor play consciously or subconsciously influence how your child plays?
11. What do you feel an outdoor play environment needs to best engage your child in free play?

Procedure

Before recruitment for this study could occur, the researcher gained permission from Sheridan College Research Ethics Board.

Phase 1: Recruitment

Step 1: Researcher met with the study to participants, gaining initial interests in participating in the study. Then obtained permission through signed Informed Consent and Permission to Audio Record forms.

Phase 2: Data Collection

Step 1: The researcher met with participants on an agreed upon time, location and date.
Step 2: Before starting the interviews, purpose of the study and consent were reviewed. Reminders of confidentiality and voluntary participation were identified.
Step 3: Interview took place using the interview protocol as a guide.
Step 4: Participants were provided an opportunity to review and edit the transcripts before analysis.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

Step 1: Collected data will be transcribed line by line by researcher.
Step 2: Following a check with the participants, the researcher will read each transcript and conduct line-by-line analysis', using the coding process familiar to the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a systematic process that aims to generate theories and explain a concept or an interaction with a subjective (Creswell & Geutterman, 2019). The coding process familiar to grounded theory is as followed:

1. Open coding: dividing text into segments and labelling the segments with codes.
2. Axial coding: connecting codes to reduce overlap, creating themes from the grouped codes.
3. Selective coding: identifying the prominent themes to draw tentative conclusions from.

Participants

Participants for this study consisted of six mothers of children between the ages of four and seven, residing in the Halton Region. Participants were located through prior connections with the researcher from past placement opportunities, shared extracurricular activities, and from close neighbourhoods to the researcher. Participants were chosen using maximal variation sampling, participants with a differing variable or characteristic (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Variation for this study was the types of environments mothers provided for their children.

Results and Discussion



Personal Values

The data collected may suggest the values participants personally hold and their individual image of children's play may greatly influence participants inclusion of outdoor play. Four of the six participants described their children's play as creative and reported searching for environments that enrich opportunities for creativity. Participants who believed that children need freedom also valued opportunities that foster outdoor exploration. This may be represented by participant six who stated "sometimes it is just more work as a parent because you have to do this clean-up and all that, but at the end of the day if it's going to keep them busy it's fine. They are entertained" (participant 6, line 43-44). The researcher also found that the participants who described a characteristic of an outdoor play environment as valuable, also identified that characteristic as essential for constructive play. This can be seen in the data when one participant identified valuing children's autonomy and later stating an environment with less rules and adult guidance best supports her child's independence during outdoor play (participant 3, line 50). It may be argued that values adults hold when considering outdoor play environments may impact how children play outdoors.

The Environment

Most participants reported feeling unimpressed with the outdoor play environments at their children's schools, one even calling their child's outdoor area the "chicken coup" (participant 6, line 27). Participants described the outdoor environments at school to be too open and inappropriate for their children's age. Participant 5 stated her child did not have opportunities to use a variety of skills due to a lack of materials and age restrictions for playground equipment (participant 5, line 30). The data may suggest that the quality of children's play experiences may be influenced by the environment that is available. From the data collected some participants identified the difficulties children have in finding enjoyment when spending time outdoors and found it challenging to encourage children to play. Participant 1 even believed that the children become bored outside when there are few opportunities to be creative from the environment provided (participant 1, line 17).

Interactions

From the data it may be suggested that children's interactions with others has a significant effect on their outdoor play experiences. The participants stated that socializing with others greatly impacted their children's interests when outdoors, how the children played, and what they learned. The data may show that interactions with others could be more impactful than the physical design of outdoor environments on children's play. It is also important to note that participants felt that adult's interactions with the outdoors effects children's interests with playing outdoors. Participant 4 identified that when an adult shows a disinterest in the outdoors her children become disengaged from playing in the environment (participant 4, line 30). Interacting with others may encourage children to explore more outdoors, but too much direction may hinder children's abilities to learn, grow and enjoy playing. One participant stated that it is important to know when to let children play on their own, as directing play too much can hinder children's creativity (participant 1, line 48).

Conclusion

In conclusion one may argue from the data that adults have a direct influence on children's outdoor learning through prominence of values, providing resources and participating in play. The data may conclude that there is a potential to design outdoor environments to meet individual needs of children based on how adults notice children interacting. This study hopes to ignite the importance of outdoor play experiences and provide parents with the voice to coordinate with staff to design children's outdoor spaces. Yet, it may be noted that this research is limited to the single interviews with each participant, therefore the data is limiting. Conclusions drawn do not reflect that of a population or the full experiences of participants. This study opens possibilities to further explore parent perspectives of outdoor play and the potential to triangulate future studies through using other methods of data collection. This study may lead to open communication between educators, parents and community members, and motivate further studies on the influence outdoor play environments may have on children's learning