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**Teacher Talk: Theory to Practice**  
**Dreaming A Playground: Supporting Children’s Imagination**

Kathleen Burriss<sup>a</sup>, Sandra Stone<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Middle Tennessee State University, <sup>b</sup>Northern Arizona University

Dr. Kathy Burriss (B.A. and M.Ed. Elementary Education, Ed.D. in Early Childhood Education) taught diversity, research, and curriculum courses in the Department of Elementary and Special Education at Middle Tennessee State University. She remains an advocate for children’s play, outdoor activity, and multiage learning.

Dr. Sandra J. Stone is Professor Emeritus at Northern Arizona University. Her research and publication interests include multiage education, early childhood, play, and literacy. She consults nationally and internationally.

**Abstract**

Authors describe the value of designing a playground to promote children’s imagination through play. Important for parents, teachers and administrators, this discussion provides the theoretical rationale in defense of children’s outdoor play and the imminent need to revitalize children’s diminishing capacities to imagine.

**Considering the Importance of Imagination**

Imagination is future-oriented: the process of inventing things that are not yet a reality. For children, imaginative play provides the freedom to invent and create, which serves as a foundation for children’s future roles as creative adults (Stone, 2017). Imaginative, creative play provides children with the inspiration, motivation, enjoyment, and abilities to engage future ideas. For example, play is what scientists use to develop theories, what composers use to create music, what poets and novelists use to fashion words, and what artists use to craft art (Froebel, in Armstrong, 1998; Gray, 2013; Wasserman, 1992).

L. Frank Baum (1917), author of *The Lost Princess of Oz*, shares the importance of the imaginative child becoming the imaginative adult:

*“Imagination has brought mankind through the Dark Ages to its present state of civilization. Imagination led Columbus to discover America. Imagination led Franklin to discover electricity. Imagination has given us the steam engine, the telephone, the talking-machine and the automobile, for these things had to be dreamed of before they*

*became realities. So I believe that dreams - day dreams, you know, with your eyes wide open and your brain-machinery whizzing - are likely to lead to the betterment of the world. The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent, and therefore to foster civilization."*

When children play, every child becomes a visionary, creating a new world of his or her own making through imagination. Without imagination, people would be left to replicating only what they know; instead, imagination ensures innovation. Unstructured play motivates imagination and frames children's unbounded creativity. Play is not merely an activity to amuse children or to entertain; rather, play is far more important (Vygotsky, 2004).

During play, Vygotsky believed that children create their own imaginary worlds. Children's minds become a vehicle to consider possibilities and then, playful action creates innovation. Creativity begins with imagination (Vygotsky, 2004). With imaginative, open-ended play, a child's thinking becomes flexible, fluid, and effortless. As children use their imaginations during open-ended play, they extend and develop ways to creatively solve problems, find novel solutions, and to reach beyond what exists to what could be. Play prepares a child to be a creative artist, an innovative scientist, an inventive writer, an inspired leader, a transformative educator, or an ingenious engineer. Play is divergent thinking at its best. Einstein believed that imagination was more important than knowledge. Knowledge, he thought, was limited, whereas imagination encompassed the whole world; imagination could stimulate, inspire, and contribute to progress. (Einstein, 1931).

Sir Ken Robinson (2015) distinguished the differences between creativity and imagination: "Imagination is the root of creativity. It is the ability to bring to mind things that aren't present to our senses. Creativity is putting your imagination to work. It is applied imagination. Innovation is putting new ideas into practice" (p. 118). This means imagination is a mental process; creativity is the action generated from the internal thought. Imagination is the thought and creativity is the action. Play affords children with the freedom of thought and the flexibility of action.

As creativity originates from imagination, Vygotsky (2004) cautioned us to consider that the true value of children's creativity is not in the result or product; rather, he emphasized the critical importance of using the *processes* of imagining and creating. Imagination becomes the intrinsic motivation for creating. Pink (2009) notes, "For artists, scientists, inventors, schoolchildren, and the rest of us, intrinsic motivation – the drive to do something because it is interesting, challenging, and absorbing – is essential for high levels of creativity" (p. 45).

Unfortunately, play, indoors and outdoors, is often pushed aside or eliminated in many schools, by prioritizing a standardized curriculum, instead of creating indoor and outdoor play opportunities designed to engage children's imaginations. Regrettably, unstructured outdoor play which nurtures imagination is often no longer legitimized by school and home (Kim, 2011; Veselack et al., 2013).

Kim (2011) describes decreases in creativity and especially notes this loss in young children. Additionally, Gray et al. (2023) describe how children today have diminished opportunities for

independent experiences, which is reflected in the decline of children's mental health. Emphasizing standardized tests, overscheduling children's lives, scripting school lessons, and spending time on technologies undermine children's opportunities to explore events, take risks, confront challenges, hypothesize ideas, examine materials, and elaborate thoughts, particularly through the avenue of play. Additionally, worries regarding children's physical and social safety restrict their time and opportunities to experience the neighborhood outdoors (Burriss & Burriss, 2011a).

Outdoor play is a critical component for children's overall well-being. Children, even young children, require undisturbed time outdoors to consider their options (interests, make choices) and implement actions (mental and physical processes) (Kim, 2011; Veselack et al., 2010, 2013).

Genuine outdoor play experiences are essential towards nurturing children's imagination. Ideas do not generate from external materials; rather, as a mental process, thoughts originate within children (Piaget, 1981). Through play, children do not merely solve problems; critically, they create problems to solve. Arlin (1977, as cited in Kim, 2011) believes problem finding is key in generating new ideas. Furthermore, Steiner, (nd) argues creativity is a prerequisite for innovation; Keep in mind that creativity is rooted in imagination (Robinson, 2015).

Kiewra & Veselack (2016) highlight examples of children's imaginations that represent all domains of learning. For example, outdoor play provides for children's emerging imaginations to unfold as they engage in problem-finding and problem-solving strategies, use flexible materials in a variety of ways, and ponder in unconventional thinking.

The outdoor environment supports children in using their imaginations to create innovations in unique ways not possible in the traditional indoor classroom. Critically important, in this outdoor open-ended environment, children experience risk, challenge, difficulty, problem finding, and knowledge disparities. Planning outdoor play environments will nurture children's imaginations through unstructured outdoor play.

## **Dreaming a Playground**

**Understanding Play.** First, it is important to understand that play is recognized as essential for the well-being of every child and vitally important for the development of all children, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Bergen, 1988; Bergen et al., 2020; Burriss & Folks-Boyd, 2005; Elkind, 2007; Fromberg, 2002; Gray, 2017; Gray et al., 2023; Stone, 2017). Through play, children come to understand how to meet and negotiate life's challenges (Gray, 2017). Building on their problem-solving strategies and capacities to deal with risk, children attempt different problem resolutions. Through play, children develop the social and intellectual skills they need for success in their own culture (Gray, 2013). Play is a risk-free environment where children can try out different ideas as there is no failure in play. Through play, children learn to be resourceful, persevering, and resilient - all components to ensure well-being and success.

Play is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen process not product-oriented, nonliteral, and enjoyable (Johnson et al., 1999; Stone & Burriss, 2019). Children choose to play with the

motivation coming from within as an adult is not guiding or directing the play. Children choose with whom they will play, what they want to play, and how they want to play. Since play is not goal-directed, children are free to try different variations of the play experience. The characteristics of play afford every child the freedom to imagine, to create his or her own reality. As is imagination, play is an extraordinary human quality supporting an opportunity for players to progress and advance in their own development (Robinson, 2015).

In highlighting nature as a framework for a range and variety of imaginative outdoor play events, children integrate their physical, social/emotional, and intellectual aptitudes. As they enhance abilities to express unique and unconventional thinking, they also gain knowledge in strategies regarding sharing of materials, collaborating with others in problem-finding/solving, and exhibiting kind behaviors with peers.

Importantly, throughout this play-based process, children's learning continues regarding basic content such as mathematics, literacy, science, physics, botany, art, and geology. For example, in play, children learn to count the pinecones they need for their pretend outdoor store, they make signs to hang on trees to warn other children of the flying insects, they pretend to read books to the babies in their outdoor home center, they learn which plants are important for the butterflies, and they discover what sinks and floats in the outdoor tubs of water (Lozon, in press).

Toward engaging in imaginative and creative experiences, play provides multiple possibilities for divergent thinking. For example, in non-literal thinking, the child determines or mentally constructs a block of wood into something else when, in reality, the block of wood is a block of wood. For children in play, however, a block of wood is transformed and changed from reality into what children want the block to represent (phone, pizza, spaceship). The child imagines a new reality by transforming an object's meaning. A child's thinking assumes precedence over external reality; a child experiments with new possibilities. Outdoor play environments are viable, promising, and worthy of supplying multiple opportunities for children's imaginations to flourish.

Without an understanding of what play is and what it is not, adults may be less effective in building, maintaining, and evaluating quality outdoor playscapes and learning opportunities. Organizations such as *The International Play Association*, *US Play Coalition*, *Children in Nature Network*, *National Wildlife Federation (NWF)*, *The National Association of Young Children (NAEYC)*, *Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)*, *The Association for the Study of Play (TASP)*, *No Child Left Inside*, *Evergreen*, *Schoolyard Habitat Project (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS))*, and *Project Wild* are committed to protecting play and encouraging play environments for the well-being of our children and providing children with the outdoor play spaces and places for their imagination to thrive.

**Play Types.** Researchers have identified four types of play: Functional, Constructive, Dramatic, and Games with Rules (Johnson et al., 1999). The imaginative outdoor play environment provides for these play types.

*Functional Play* flourishes in outdoor play spaces. During functional play, children find pleasure in interacting and playing with the environment. Children enjoy blowing, jumping, crawling,

running, splashing, climbing, chasing, and squishing. Initially, these experiences evolve around a child's senses; the actions are repetitive for pleasure and include both fine and gross motor actions. Through children's senses and actions, they explore the outdoor environment, as well as consider their bodies' capacities to influence, manipulate, and control events. Examples include wiggling toes in sand, running with wind, and splashing with water.

The need for functional play decreases as children grow older. Three-to-five-year-olds engage in functional play about 33% of the time, and it is replaced with constructive play (Rubin et al., 1983; Stone, 1993, 2021). As children explore their outside world, they begin to gain an understanding of how they can physically influence the environment. They develop concepts about the nature of things, how things can change, and an understanding of cause and effect (i.e., squishing, plopping, thickening, and thinning mud). In doing so, this helps them develop a sense of their bodies, cultivate hand-eye coordination, develop an understanding of the permanence of objects, and investigate the concepts of time and space (Stone, 1993). They develop confidence and particular skills; they begin to define their function in the world, as well as conceptually understanding their environment. Toward these goals, the traditional indoor classroom is limited in providing children with adequate space and materials to run, jump, squish, wiggle, dig, splash, or plop. In the outdoors, the environment supports dirt digging, mud squishing, water splashing and feet running and jumping.

As children grow, functional play evolves into constructive and dramatic play where children's imaginations begin to unfold. Chasing bubbles becomes trying to catch flying fairies and mud becomes a mountain for imaginary dinosaurs.

*Constructive Play* unfolds outdoors as children build, paint, draw, solve problems, experiment, sculpt, map, design, craft, create, and, of course, imagine. Constructive play is a common form of play for young children, ranging from 40% of all play experiences at three-and-one-half years to approximately 51% at ages four, five, and six (Rubin et al., 1983; Stone, 1993, 2021).

In constructive play, children begin to use intellectual processes. They imagine, mentally create, and then construct. They build intricate structures, draw or paint imaginary creatures, and sculpt with mud and sand. In the process, children enter higher levels of thought, learning to discriminate, solve problems, hypothesize, imagine, and invent new ideas (Stone, 1993, 2021). Children gain confidence in their own abilities to imagine and create, providing them with emotional satisfaction.

Providing time and a variety of materials for outdoor constructive play experiences remain integral to children's holistic learning and development. Toward optimal constructive play, children freely choose, maintain, and enjoy their own experiences. Keep in mind that teacher-defined projects often become work instead of creative play construction, limiting each child's whole child development (problem solving, experimenting, creating, sharing), as well as undermining children's capacity for imagination and creativity.

*Dramatic Play* and *Sociodramatic Play* involve children manipulating ideas, creating, problem-solving, making decisions, thinking divergently, cooperating, negotiating, inventing, understanding, organizing, reconstructing, symbolizing, scripting, and imagining.

In dramatic and sociodramatic play, children imagine and then transform themselves into characters, such as a princess, a super-hero, or an airplane pilot. Children also engage in dramatic play with toy animals and props, imagining various scenarios. Children may pretend they are dinosaurs or use toy dinosaurs to play out stories in a sand area. Children may build a bridge over an outdoor stream to play out the story of the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* or build outdoor structures to tell the story of *The Three Little Pigs* or play out the story of *Cinderella* in an outdoor drama center. Children may create an outdoor bus stop with a bench to play out the story of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003). Dramatic play significantly engages children's imagination as they play out favorite stories or invent their own stories to tell.

In dramatic and sociodramatic play, children reason through how their imaginary world functions. Creatively, children combine multiple experiences to tell their story. They use concentration and organization to focus and expand roles and themes. Children sequence their play events using past, present, and future, which supports their mobility of thought. Additionally, children problem-solve, make decisions, use open-ended thinking, and explore new concepts. They learn how to cooperate, settle disagreements, take turns, negotiate, persuade, and defend. Children exchange ideas and expand their knowledge. They engage in group problem-solving (Stone, 1993, 2021).

The outdoor environment (open areas, trees, gardens, platforms/shelters, bikes and wagons, sand, water, and mud areas) ensures children with dramatic play opportunities not possible in the indoor classroom. With dramatic play, children create new worlds of their own making through imagination, putting new ideas into action.

*Games with Rules* play includes creating and learning rules, sequencing, organizing, improvising, adapting, competing, collaborating, sharing, turn-taking, transforming, socializing, thinking, choice-making, problem-solving, moral and fairness judging, and learning to lead and follow (Stone, 1993). As much as games with rules are usually dominated by established, often handed down, rules, children do engage in inventing and creating their own rules for the games they play outdoors. Children will improvise their own rules for cooperative play, adapting games to their own understanding and experiences.

Simple rule games are common in early childhood play (i.e., "You roll the ball and I'll roll it back"). Children between the ages of four and seven years begin to organize their play, developing rules on how the play is supposed to occur (Stone, 1993). Older children advance their game-playing skills, with games becoming more competitive and rules are more defined and fixed. Preoperational children (ages two-to-seven-years) often do not understand how some actions may affect game-playing results. As young children develop from the preoperational stage to the concrete operational stage (ages seven-to-12) and secure various understandings, they begin to engage more in games with rules (Piaget, 1962; Stone, 1993).

Games with Rules remain an important part of a child's holistic development, including imagination. Lozon (in press) describes how a group of young children in an outdoor childcare center pretended to play baseball with no ball, bat, or bases. The outdoor game was *imagined*, and the children enjoyed every minute of their pretend play.

The outdoor environment provides unlimited possibilities for functional, constructive, dramatic (socio-dramatic), and games with rules play experiences. For example, outdoor functional play includes digging in the sand, blowing and chasing bubbles, and climbing a tree. Constructive play includes both natural and manufactured materials such as drawing a map to find a lost treasure, painting a sign to warn people of the angry fairies in the flowers and bushes, or building a tower out of rocks to save the play people from a flood of water.

Both props and particular areas highlight the potential for outdoor dramatic play such as a boat to sail to *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak), or an outdoor stage area to put on a play about television characters *Bluey* or *Spidey and His Amazing Friends*. The outdoor areas offer spaces for games with rules. Children will play simple tag games; if you are tagged, you are “it,” easy games of “catch” with large balls, and races such as the first one to the tree, wins. Children use their imagination to create their own games with rules as they build magical tree houses, run from a tyrannosaurus rex, and hide from imaginary giants. The rules can be simple or complex such as you can only hide from the giants behind trees, or to escape the angry dinosaur you must cross the bridge over the stream. Children will make up their own rules for the games they play.

While the indoor classroom in schools is limited by size and material, the outdoor playscape is most effective in ensuring children engage all levels and types of play with the outdoors, becoming an open canvas for a child’s imagination to develop.

### **Dreaming a Playground: Play - A Foundation for Imagination**

Dreaming a playground for outdoor play provides a rich foundation for children’s imagination to unfold, engaging children in the reality of imagination. Imagination is not cute, glitzy, easy, risk-free, mandated, formulaic, or standardized. Play is not a product; play is the process of the child’s thinking and doing.

Before play occurs, children explore the object or material. Then, during play, children move beyond the realistic, concrete object and consider the potential possibilities of the material (the imaginative/mental process occurs). This transforming of the original object or material represents the child’s ownership during the imaginary thinking and clearly exhibits the child’s internal action to imagine and construct (Piaget, 1952, 1981).

As children play, they frame and reframe their thinking. Steiner (nd) describes how, for adults, this process integrates analytical, logical thinking with associative, intuitive thinking to uncover the real problem. As children explore their environment, they decide on the relevance of particular events and materials toward their problem finding. The child imagines and thinks, “If I have this, what can it become?” Then, the imagined becomes an innovative creation. Critically, consider the mental processes as the child thinks, “What do I have and what can I create?”

Respecting imagination as an individual process allows children to engage at their developmental and interest levels. Outdoor play also engages children of different ages, abilities, ethnicities, and socio-economic levels with each other (Stone & Burriss, 2019). The imaginative playscape

builds on the dignity of all children and represents these differences, as well as engages children in acts of kindness, imagination, and creativity.

At the forefront of children's visions during outdoor play, what are possibilities of dreaming and creating a type of playground that supports and engages children's imaginations? As adults, we can use our imagination to create environments that will ignite and nurture children's innate imagination as they embrace their own autonomy to create limitless possibilities. In creating the outdoor space, consider different areas for the landscape, such as wetlands to forests, wildflowers to gardens, and areas for wildlife such as birds, bees, butterflies, insects, and small animals. The aesthetics of the outdoor space invites children to vast opportunities for their imaginative play and creativity to unfold.

With safety always a consideration for young children's play, the environment, with adult supervision, becomes an unrestricted avenue for children to be self-directed in their play and exploration. The adult becomes a resource and a helper when needed, not a director of the play.

Consider a school playground sign referred to by Greenman (2017) in his book, *Caring Spaces, Learning Places*, called Lobotomy Park, where children were advised that the playground was not for running, digging, removing shoes, or walking on the grass among other things. Outdoor play was a restricted environment designed to mimic the controlled inside environment. Using the freedom of our imaginations, outdoor learning environments can be created to kindle children's imaginations, empowering them to imagine and create their own worlds and adventures (Stone, 2021).

### **Considering Playground Possibilities**

The following playground ideas are a springboard of possibilities for creating outdoor play areas that may fertilize children's imaginations.

- Create a forest made with tall, narrow PVC pipes painted exotic colors where children can pretend to be imaginary forest animals.
- Prepare large half-pipes designed to be small, secret caves for children to hide or plan their adventures.
- Create a campground area with a tent, pretend fire pit, and cooking utensils where children can imagine they are on a camping trip.
- Design an outdoor area for children to build and create with large Lego's® or building blocks.
- Refurbish an old boat or canoe for children to imagine a river or ocean trip.
- Place a large dead tree on a grassy area for children to climb and sit on with friends.
- Design an area with a small stream where children can dig in the mud, float a boat, or build a bridge.
- Create an outdoor stage area for children to play out stories. Provide bench seating for children to watch the dramatization of the players' favorite or created stories.
- Prepare grassy areas for outdoor game playing, chasing bubbles, or playing tag.
- Build a low tree house where children can create imaginary adventures.



- Provide sticks, various wood pieces, and tree branches that children can use to create their own houses, landscapes, or living areas for dinosaurs, fairies, and woodland creatures.
- Construct an outdoor home center with a sink, stove, table, and chairs.
- Plan an area where children have easels where they can paint their own pictures or design their own backdrops for stage area dramas.
- Use old tires to create small sand boxes for playing with animals, creatures, or vehicles.
- Provide large chalk and outdoor chalkboards or sidewalks for children's drawings or games.
- Offer areas for music and creative movement.
- Create small water areas for children to experiment with sink and float materials.
- Prepare areas for children to balance themselves on planks of wood, climb over tires, and enjoy tending to a garden.
- Create unique bench areas for children to plan, think, or enjoy talking with friends.
- Using planters or old tires, prepare little areas for children to imagine and play with small houses, little plants as trees, rocks, and toy people and animals. Use wood planks as bridges to connect the different communities.
- Develop a small pond area for children to float boats, leaves, sticks, or watch water creatures.
- Create nature trails where children can collect pinecones, leaves, sticks, and rocks, or observe squirrels, caterpillars, butterflies, and birds.
- Provide rocks and boulders for children to climb on.
- Create walking trails, and quiet places to read, wonder and imagine.

Keep in mind that all the ideas you may have for outdoor play and play areas are simply possibilities for children to create and recreate the areas as they imagine and plan their own experiences. The outdoor spaces will provide the children with ideas as they embrace the freedom of their own imaginations. The priority is the play which gives each child the fertile ground for his or her personal development of imagining, creating, and enjoying the outdoor world.

For example, children may decide to make their own pyramids in a sand area, or bury bones in a dirt area for an archaeological dig, or build a castle with outdoor blocks, or use a bench to create a bus stop, or after watching butterflies in the garden they may pretend they are butterflies. The outdoor environment provides opportunities for children to engage their curiosity, imagine their own worlds, and create their own experiences. The outdoor environment is empowering children to embrace their own potential as they imagine and create their own worlds and experiences.

Burriss (2020) encourages us to *think differently* about outdoor spaces where children may enjoy different types of play areas, where children can imagine and create their own experiences. In so doing, it is important to note that as children choose and direct their own play, they may move things in the environment to the places where their adventures will begin.

Depending on opportunities to imagine (unstructured time, freedom, flexibility, materials), some events become quite creative as children elaborate in theme, organization, role play, and language. For example, observing children on an outdoor community playground, two players

created an hour-long hamburger theme with only a small rectangular metal platform and mulch. The two players constructed their notions of a counter, food, and money. And most importantly, through this socio-dramatic play, the players in their imagination created the theme with dialogue and management of the fast-food hamburger counter. Within 10 minutes, the play involved approximately 12 additional children (strangers to one another prior to the sociodramatic play event). Yet, they followed a hamburger script with dialogue, money exchanges, food ordering and preparation. Using only mulch for both money and food, only the children knew what food was and what was money.

Keep in mind that “for artists, scientists, inventors, *schoolchildren*, and the rest of us, intrinsic motivation – the drive to do something because it is interesting, challenging, and absorbing – is essential for high levels of creativity” (Pink, 2009, p. 45), understanding that imagination is the foundation of creativity (Robinson, 2015).

### **The Adult’s Role in Dreaming a Playground**

The following areas provide adults with information useful in guiding and supporting their role in providing outdoor play that encourages children’s imaginations.

**Supporting Children’s Goals and Interests.** In dreaming a playground for children which provides the time, opportunity, materials, and children’s interest for their imaginations to unfold, it is important for adults watching children who are playing that they do not interfere; they remain quiet and unintrusive observers. Mud pies becoming pizzas, adding water to the sandbox to create a lake, or children running and flapping their arms pretending to fly like birds warrant serious adult respect and regard, but not guidance, lesson objectives, or limited time.

If adults incorporate objectives, goals or rubrics during outdoor play, the activity is designed to meet an adult’s goal and is not a play experience. In play, the child or children determine the experience, not an adult. Children may enjoy the adult-guided activity, but the task remains adult-planned and lacks a child’s motivation, imagination, and creativity. In the outdoor playground, children’s goals and interests are prioritized. Additionally, adults legitimizing children’s choices become crucial toward affording their imaginations the opportunity to explore and develop different ideas, “What did I find?” And then, “What might this become in my pretend play?”

This mental/imaginative process transforms the concrete object to a creative mental construction. For example, a child finds a tree limb, pinecone, or piece of tree bark. After the child considers what is found, he or she ponders and transitions to mentally construct, “What do I imagine this could be?” This is when the child transforms the object into a creative construction. For example, the tree limb becomes a galloping horse, the pinecone is now a bugle to call bird friends, and the piece of bark is moved to the water area as an innovative, transformed, floating boat.

**Providing Space and Materials.** As children develop at different rates, choices by children will often depend on their social, physical, and cognitive growth. Therefore, it is critical that adults provide children with both a range and variety of play possibilities, spaces, and materials. The

outdoor play area should ensure adequate space for children to simultaneously use different materials and engage in varying events (Kiewra & Veselack, 2016; Veselack et al., 2010).

Is there a quiet space for children to go for their reflection? This can be a surround of bushes, some sitting stones, or a bench by a shade tree. This quiet space affords children the opportunity to watch other children at play as well as momentarily finding a quiet space to rest, or to thoughtfully imagine possibilities for their play.

Wind chimes of different tones and materials (metal, wood, solar) provide gentle wind song. Additionally, trees provide the natural sounds of birdsongs. Bird feeders and bird houses ensure these wildlife sounds occur naturally.

Is there a construction area available for children's imagination to evolve? Different sizes and lengths of boards, crates, and bricks provide children with the adventure of building. Children imagine building a secret cave, a house in the woods, or a store to sell mud pies. Gutters, rubber or plastic tubing, tires, and shutters illustrate the variety of potential construction possibilities. Children incorporate balance, equivalence, and physics in their constructions. Critically important, children experience challenge and risk in their play (Veselack et al., 2010).

Regarding materials, include loose parts (Veselack et al., 2010). Natural materials become important in order to provide children with a range and variety of problem-finding opportunities. As children explore raised vegetable beds and flower gardens, they establish a framework for their thinking. Incorporating the natural environment remains integral toward children's potential imaginative play.

For example, instead of the traditional balance beam and climbing equipment, provide several tree trunks and/or logs to support children's creativity and gross motor development. An outdoor playscape naturally integrates different kinds of trees, bushes, rocks, and grassy areas. A gentle slope or mound provides a unique play event.

In particular, the outdoor playscape remains a four-season option. Consider the outdoor weather possibilities as children explore winter (frost, snow, snowflakes, and snowballs), summer (sunshine, growing plants, and butterflies); autumn (rain, puddles, and mud), and finally, spring (wind, broken branches, and seed pods).

Sometimes – not always – provide music near the large area where children build and run. Music may motivate some children to dance, spin, and jump. Music connects children's gross motor actions with imaginative movements. Music is not appropriate all the time because it masks the natural sounds of birdsong, wind, and other children playing.

Finally, providing children with magnifying glasses and binoculars enriches their play experiences. Children will examine rocks, plants, and little creatures with magnifying glasses. They will explore clouds, tops of trees, and birds with binoculars. They will pretend they are explorers or scientists.

For a time, an area may feature a tent and a circle of rocks for a pretend campfire. Another time, children find a large box with paddles where they will imagine they are travelers in a boat. And, preparing ahead, the children might discover several large boxes or a number of snow coasters to explore and imagine. With imagination, the boxes may become individual cars or a train, and the snow coasters may come to represent a fleet of flying saucers or floating lily pads. Keep in mind that older children might become active in the physical construction of a particular play event (creating train cars or buses with lights, numbers, and wheels), while leaving the actual play to the younger children. Older children may build a cabin or pirate plank and then move to another area, giving the younger children the opportunity to play with the creative construction (Harris-Helm et al., 2000).

In order to provide for children's imagination and creativity to flourish, it is important materials remain open for children to use in a variety of ways and places. For example, opportunity ensures children moving materials to different areas as needed for their imaginative play. They use materials from different areas to create their own play events and adventures. This means, children move pails and ropes to the tree house to create a pulley or move a board to the tree trunk in order to invent their own seesaw. Consider how new technologies generate from the imagination in the adult world, but also how new ideas emerge from children's play. Sometimes, inventors use what is familiar and do so in unusual and unique ways; other times, when current materials are not adequate, inventors create or imagine what was before unknown. With flexible and open-ended opportunities and materials and ample space to move about, the outdoors provides children with extraordinary imaginative possibilities.

Depending on children's goals and interests, Veselack, Cain-Chang, and Miller, (2010) discuss the strategy to plan outdoor areas with particular materials, but also provide large, open, non-declared spaces for children's flexible play to emerge. In planning outdoor play areas with particular materials or designated spaces for children's play, adults understand that children may move materials to different locations to accomplish their play experiences. Thus, outdoor play areas and materials are designed to be flexible so children can easily pursue their own play goals and experiences wherever their imaginative play leads them.

In nurturing children's imaginations, what do we see? There is a sand box with a variety of materials. This includes different sizes of pails, shovels, spoons, sifters, watering cans, and funnels. There is a hose with perhaps – on certain days – access to mud play. There are pathways in the woods with wind chimes, bird feeders, bird houses and a tree house. The tree house may be only three feet above ground level with slides, ramps, and ladders. In children's imaginations, the treehouse becomes a spaceship, houseboat, or castle.

A storage shed is close by with wagons, wheel barrels, pails, and digging tools where children imagine they are farmers planting crops, ranchers riding horses, or archeologists digging up dinosaur bones. Additionally, tables and easels support possible art and crafts where children imagine and paint a make-believe garden or fantasy beings. A platform or gazebo provides a space for stories to be read, plays to be performed, where children may imagine they are the creatures in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak). Nearby, teachers may engage in discussions with children that may be planned or occur spontaneously depending upon a child's particular day's finding or discovery.

In designing the spaces and materials, adults provide playgrounds that invite adventure by providing different types of materials and ‘loose parts,’ thus attracting and enticing children to embrace their imaginations by dreaming, inventing, and creating (Frost, 1992; Greenman, 2017; Johnson et al., 1999). Greenman (2017) suggests providing children’s play areas with an assortment of ‘loose parts’ such as junk-wood, tires, bricks, pipes, rocks, wheels where children can imagine and create their own unique play structures. Providing space and unique materials stimulate children’s imaginations and inspire their creative endeavors.

It is also important for children to experience risk and challenge. As a part of their imaginative and creative processes, their tower may fall, their mud may become overwatered and their attempts to build a seesaw with boards may fail. They imagined what they wanted to do, but their creative, practical capacities may be challenged. Unknowing adults may intervene by telling the child to put the largest block at the bottom of the tower, helping them to measure out the correct amount of water to the mud area and assisting them with leveraging the board to effectively seesaw; in this way, adults ensure the product of tower, mud and seesaw, but deny the child’s opportunity to explore, discover, problem-solve, hypothesize, invent and reconstruct. In an effort to guarantee the product or outcome, the adult diminishes the child’s capacities to not only imagine and create, but also undermines learning concepts such as gravity, blending, and balance. Only through their “playing” with different ideas and materials can children begin to acknowledge relationships in their environment.

**Arranging Time.** Adequate time for children’s outdoor play is significantly important for play episodes to develop, imagination to advance, and creativity to unfold. Regarding children’s interest, Veselack et al. (2013) describe how when children, even very young children, become interested in an outdoor material (i.e., water/puddle, tree limb/tree bark, or bricks/crates) or an event (i.e., weather such as wind, snow, rain, moving bug, or other children), they focus, engage, and discuss for extended periods of time, because the outdoor environment, unlike the indoors, is more unpredictable, providing children with unique opportunities not possible in the customary indoor classroom. This means, learning and experiences become possible outdoors that cannot occur indoors.

The outdoor play environment also naturally integrates various content areas, giving children time to explore science, botany, geology, and math. Children’s dramatic play incorporates language, literacy, and atypical scripts; and the sand, water, and mud areas become rich in experimenting, hypothesizing, and predicting.

Extended and undisturbed blocks of time in the outdoors provide children with not only thinking and experimenting opportunities, but also time to elaborate on their imaginative and creative play. When children engage in their play, an hour or so one day may extend to the following day (Kiewra & Veselack, 2016). Problem finding involves mental, physical, and emotional effort and therefore, also requires time.

Children, just like adults, ponder different places and events prior to the act of choosing the one or ones they wish to commit to that day. Gathering materials to create their own possibilities takes time to explore, test for interest, and plan for their creative action.

Our history is replete with scientists who imagined discoveries and were discredited; artists who innovated new forms and were scorned and business minds and entrepreneurs who were denied funding for cutting edge concepts. An important component when nurturing children's imagination is to legitimize the mental process, understanding that children require time, rehearsal, and elaboration in outdoor play, as adults empower children with their own choices, goals, and interests.

Adults provide children with rich outdoor play opportunities by giving them time and space. Adults, who respect children's interests and goals, not only invite, support, and sustain children's innate imaginations and creative processes to unfold, but also understand how their role in supporting outdoor play is also essential for children's healthy human development (Greenman, 2017).

### **The Adult's Role: Understanding Children's Social Development**

Many children are "ready to go," and enjoy the outdoor play experience, but others require time to watch first. Adults provide a safe place for a child to observe until he or she is at ease to engage in outdoor play or play with others. A bench, picnic table, or tree stump provides a place and time for a child to watch and consider play opportunities.

Adults consider Parten's (1932) six stages in children's social play: **unoccupied** (child interacts and explores self and environment), **solitary** (child plays alone and independently), **onlooker** (child observes the interactions of other children), **parallel** (child plays independently but near or among other children), **associative** (child plays with others, but does not subordinate to the interests of the other children) and **cooperative** (child plays and interacts with other children, taking complementing roles).

It is important to understand that children do not sequentially progress through these stages in all outdoor play events. For example, while some children enjoy boisterous and collaborative dramatic play (pretending to be astronauts in spaceships), the same children may prefer solitaire or associate art. Similarly, while some children may enjoy collaborating in a construction project (boards/hammers, planks, crates), some of the same children may prefer associative play when in the mud or sand areas.

It is important for adults to legitimize children's developmental stages. There are times when some children may choose a less social interaction. A child chooses and engages at his or her particular developmental level, interest, and comfort. This is why changing out areas with different materials might prove advantageous in attracting children to engage in a new play event. In addition to the challenge of different materials, children may interact with new playmates. Therefore, it is essential the outdoor play environment provides children with a range and variety of ways to engage their play opportunities, dependent on their social development and comfort levels.

Additionally, an adult may notice a child returning to the same play area for several days. This may be a boy enjoying the tree house with others as they pretend to be astronauts in spaceships,

or firefighters using binoculars to locate forest fires. An adult may observe a girl walking alone as she finds special stones along the path; she may simply enjoy gathering different rocks or collecting rocks to create her own rock store. Recalling Parten's six stages toward social play, it is important to acknowledge that children remain unique in their social development and interests. These developmental differences underscore the critical importance that the outdoor playscape is flexible and diverse, with opportunities for the children's varied social development needs.

With emerging social competence, collaboration also becomes important. In order to extend children's understanding of the world and its people, they communicate and interact with persons representing differing abilities, ethnicities, races, and socio-economic levels. Additionally, play involving children of different ages naturally supports and promotes learning, development, and shared imaginations. Children help and are helped, they lead and others follow, and some children talk and others listen; mixed-age play groups extend and elaborate, among others, language, content, socio-emotional expectations, and the support and extension of the imaginary world (Stone & Burriss, 2019; Stone & Stone, 2021).

### **The Adult's Role: Nurturing Children's Imaginations**

The adult's role in nurturing children's imaginations during outdoor play incorporates respecting and providing for children's varied goals and interests, providing adequate and varied spaces and materials for inspiring children's outdoor imaginative play, and planning adequate time for children's imagination and creative endeavors to unfold.

Consider: From where does a child's imagination generate? Is it from a group of children in boisterous pirate play, in two children gently pretending to paddle their boat across the ocean, or does it originate in a child's quiet mind as he or she immerses in the sounds of nature? The answer is -- all of the above. This is why it is vital for adults to provide, protect, and nurture children so they have time, opportunity, and a range of materials to freely explore, test, and create – to imagine! In order for parents, teachers, and administrators to cooperate and ensure these possibilities, data describe the importance of providing a written outdoor school policy (Burriss & Burriss, 2011b).

### **Assessing Children's Outdoor Play**

In qualitative studies, Kiewra & Veselack (2016) and Veselack et al. (2010, 2013) used "nature notes" to observe and record children's interactions in the outdoors. Assessing outdoor play involves video recording observations, making notes, scripting children's conversations, drawing illustrations, and photographing events (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Importantly, teachers understand their roles as observers and do not intervene in the ongoing play. For the most authentic and influential data, show children pictures of their play environment and their actual play experiences. Show children pictures of the treehouse, construction areas, art areas, traditional slides, and swings, and talk with them regarding these various outdoor play areas and their play episodes. Ask the children which play areas and episodes look to be the most fun and ask "why?" Talking with children regarding their play

choices and experiences will provide rich insight into the recorded play events. In this way, designing a playground to nurture children's imaginations will truly generate from children's dreams.

### **Parents, Teachers, and Administrators as Outdoor Play Advocates**

Wasserman (1992) wisely shares how “play allows children to make discoveries that go far beyond the realm of what we adults think is important to know” (p. 133). In order to ensure children's quality and imaginative outdoor play occurs, it is vital for parents, teachers, and administrators to understand what is happening when children engage in outdoor, imaginative play and why this type of play is critical for their children's holistic development.

Kiewra & Veselack (2016) and Steiner (nd) describe how maintaining the planet requires people to solve problems, adapt to varied circumstances and effectively communicate with one another. They discuss how the future world requires people who continue to explore alternatives in order to improve life. Kiewra & Veselack (2016) believe that when people engage in particular experiences, they develop and express creativity; in turn, they may apply this creative thinking in a variety of situations. Thus, it is critically important for educators to describe and support the unlimited potential for children to engage in outdoor playscapes. Information regarding imagination and creativity, play types and benefits, and descriptions and need for unstructured, flexible, and divergent play is important for parents to understand and become outdoor play advocates as well.

Documenting and discussing children's outdoor play experiences will enhance teachers,' parents,' and administrators' understandings of the benefits and importance of outdoor play for children's strong and healthy growth in multiple areas such as cognitive, physical, and social development as well as in literacy, math, and science areas (Lozon, in press). With this insight, adults (parents, teachers, and administrators) confidently advocate and plan for open-ended playscapes for children to explore, imagine, create, and enjoy.

### **Conclusion**

Outdoor play provides freedom for children to take risks without fear of failure; they engage in the joy of discovery, with endless possibilities (Gray, 2013). In play, a child is learning at exactly his or her own point of understanding (Stone, 2017). And, important for the current discussion, outdoor play provides children with the context to imagine and create.

Piaget states that “. . . children should be able to do their own experimenting and their own research. Adults provide appropriate materials, but “the essence is in order for a child to *understand* something, he must construct it himself, he must re-invent it. Every time we teach a child something, we keep him from re-inventing it for himself. On the other hand, that which we allow him to discover by himself will remain with him visibly. . . for the rest of his life” (Piers [ed.] 1972, p. 27).

When children play outdoors, they freely imagine and create. Dreaming a playground that supports children's imagination and creativity provides them with the inspiration, motivation,



enjoyment, and abilities to engage future ideas. Thus, outdoor imaginative play becomes a foundation for children's future roles as creative adults (Stone, 2017).

In considering the future, play today will prepare children with capacities to mediate better tomorrows. As Einstein said, "Logic will get you from A to Z. Imagination will get you everywhere." Imagination gives people a vision into the future which is the epitome of human success (Hatt, 2018).

As L. Frank Baum proposes, "*The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent, and therefore to foster civilization.*" (n.d.)

Let's dream a playground where children can freely imagine and create.

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