Children’s Social Competence, Physical Activity, and Early Engineering Thinking in the Imagination Playground™, Traditional Playground, and Dramatic Play Area

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Abstract

Researchers at Purdue University observed preschool-aged children at play in three play settings: the Imagination Playground™, the Traditional Playground, and the Dramatic Play Area, in order to compare the occurrence of social, physical, and engineering play in each play context. This observational study included 68 children (30 girls; 38 boys) observed in a Head Start Center and in the Purdue University Laboratory Preschool during 3 ½ months in the spring of 2013. The Imagination Playground™ provided unique opportunities for play. Compared with the other two play settings, children in the Imagination Playground™ displayed significantly more early engineering play, large muscle movement, constructive play, and parallel play. Play in the Traditional Playground featured large muscle movements and functional play. In the Dramatic Play area, children’s play included high levels of fine motor movement and pretend play. While all three play settings offer unique and valuable play opportunities, Imagination Playground™ is unique in facilitating play experience that includes both high levels of body movement and an opportunity to engage in and understand construction and the basic engineering design process.