Monkey bars, noodles and hay bales: a comparative analysis of social interaction in two school ground contexts

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Introduction
At school, students also learn societal norms, values, and beliefs. Much of the social learning also takes place outside of the classroom and in playgrounds during morning and lunch recess (Bundy, Luckett, Tranter, Naughton, Ragen, & Spies, 2009; Hyndman, Benson, & Telford, 2014a; 2014b; Hyndman, Benson, Ullah, & Telford, 2014) yet here has been limited investigation of the relationship between playground design and children's social development during school recess.

Aim
The aim of this study was to compare primary school aged children's typical social behaviours in two distinctly different playground contexts: a school with fixed equipment and a school with moveable playground equipment.

Methods
Context: Two Catholic coeducation schools in regional Victoria.
School A had fixed playground equipment eg goal posts, fixed climbing frame, sandpit, oval, hard surface for hopscotch, monkey bars, ladders, slide.
School B was a newly formed school and had moveable play equipment eg hay bales, milk crates, swimming noodles, wooden planks, sand/swimming shells, plastic cones.

Participants:
School A – 152 primary school aged children
School B – 123 primary school aged children

Data collection: unobtrusive video recording of children playing over one week at both recess and lunch time.

Data analysis: - team of five researchers observed and compared the social behaviour of children in the two distinctively differently designed playgrounds.

Results
While children in both playgrounds engaged in each of these types of play there were some interesting differences:

i. Onlooker, parallel, and parallel aware play
   After observing other children play, children in the playground with moveable equipment moved to trying out some of the things they had observed. They had a purpose for their observing of others play.

ii. Simple social play – similar activities were observed however in the playground with moveable equipment children's play had greater physicality and exuberance.

iii. Complimentary and reciprocal play – similar physical activities were observed however, in the playground with moveable equipment the play was harmonious. There was a notable absence of disagreements and arguments.

iv. Cooperative play - in the school with moveable play equipment children engaged in a wider range of physical and creative activities thus providing for more opportunity for social interaction from a wider range of children of different ages and abilities. They demonstrated persistence in developing team work and planning for a common outcome or goal.

Conclusion
The nature of the play space may influence aspects of children’s social play; in particular, a playground with unstructured materials lends itself to quality negotiation and collaboration between children. Play provides children with the opportunity to self-direct, self-organise, exercise self-control and negotiate with others (Reed & Brown, 2000). This study illustrated that the hidden curriculum of the school playground, that is those lessons that are learned but are not openly conveyed, and particularly the design of the playground can have impact on children's social and emotional learning and development. These findings may provide suggestions for the provision of particular areas or play equipment that promotes social, emotional and cognitive development. A well designed playground is one that evolves to meet not only the physical needs but also the social and emotional needs of children. Given the social and emotional benefits of playgrounds with moveable equipment, it seems logical to provide these types of equipment for children to explore.

References