Loose Parts
Re-imagining Outdoor Play Spaces from a Constructivist Perspective

“The Bird Habitat”

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“In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it”

Simon Nicholson, 1971
Theory of Loose Parts

“The Meteor Hole”

“The Obstacle Course”
What are loose parts?

- Found objects & materials
- Open-ended objects - no particular pre-determined use
- Intriguing, alluring to children’s interests
- Mobile, transportable
What does play with loose parts promote?

- Language
- Divergent thinking
- Active learning
- Experimenting
- Critical thinking
- Problem-solving
- Collaboration
- Sensory integration
- Developmental integration across domains
- Sustainability
Logical conceptual connections
(the case we want to make in this presentation)

Importance of Executive Functioning

Outdoor play with loose parts informs curriculum, supports standards, & fosters falling in love with the natural world

 Loose Parts promote open-ended play

Open-ended (constructivist) play leads to higher EF

Outdoor environments provide natural context for loose parts

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Executive Functioning
Key Components (Brown, 2005)

- **Activation**: Organizing, prioritizing, planning
- **Focus**: Directing attention; persistence
- **Memory**: Using verbal & non-verbal working memory & recall
- **Action**: Monitoring; self-regulating actions
- **Emotion**: Managing Frustration; regulating emotions
- **Effort**: Maintaining alertness; pacing; time management

Design work

Explaining the water channel design
Importance of Executive Functioning

- **EF = “Air traffic control system”** - ages 3-5 critical window (Ctr. On Dev. Child, Harvard U.)

- **Research increasingly points to EF levels as important predictor of future academic & life success** Bailey, 2007; Blaire & Razza, 2007, Borella et al., 2010, Broidy et al., 2003, Denson et al., 2011, Duncan et al., 2007; Gathercole et al., 2004 Morrison et al., 2010

- **Physical activity also proving to promote brain development** Tomporowski, Davis, Miller & Naglieri (2007); Chomitz et al (2009); Prosser & Jiang (2008)
SC (for example) ELS Prioritize Dimensions of Executive Functioning

**Approaches to Learning:**
- AL 1. Children engage in play as a means to develop their individual approaches to learning.
- AL 2. Children show curiosity, eagerness and satisfaction as a learner.
- AL 4. Children demonstrate an increasing ability to envision a goal and to accomplish it.
- AL 5. Children extend their learning through the use of memory, reasoning, and problem-solving skills.

**Social/Emotional Development:**
- SE1. Children will demonstrate a positive sense of self.
- SE2. Children will demonstrate self control, respect and responsibility.
- SE3. Children express feelings and show concern for others.
- SE4. Children will form healthy social relationships.
Open-ended Play & Executive Functioning

- Kids with more free time & autonomy develop higher levels of EF & self-direction: Barker et al, 2014 (University of Colorado)
- Traditional psycho-metric testing (IQ) doesn’t measure EF skills (Ardilla, Pineda & Rosselli, 2000; Blair et al., in progress @ Penn State)
- Free play promotes decision-making and problem-solving (Gray, 2013)
- Curricula that promote scaffolding & include play promote higher levels of EF (e.g Tools of the Mind, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, etc.)
Value of Loose Parts Play

- Promotes creativity & problem solving (Asbury & Rich, 2010)
- Increases activity levels, social & cognitive play (Bundy et al., 2009)
- Encourages manipulation of play environment (Dempsey & Strickland, 1993)
- Promotes cognitive development as children search for meaning (Dodge & Frost, 1986)
- Promotes development of judgment (risk-taking) (Gleave, 2008)
- Encourages constructive play, space making, and dramatic play; characteristics of structures & loose parts suggest particular kinds of play (Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans, 2008)
Outdoor play: Policy statements (partial list)

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Center for Disease Control
- National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
- National Association of Sport and Physical Education
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- Alliance for Play
- Defending the Early Years
- US Play Coalition
- United Nations
- International Play Association
EC Curricula models/approaches that prioritize interaction with natural environments

- Waldorf
- Montessori
- Waldkindergarten (forest kindergartens)
- Reggio Emilia

- Our program (N.E. Miles EC DC @ College of Charleston) demonstrates “responsible eclecticism” (Jaruszewicz, 2005), drawing from many different curricular influences & ideas
- As a demonstration program, we have the freedom to explore, experiment, and reflect on curriculum as a “moving target” – an organic construct

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A Journey: Re-imagining outdoor play space

Mary & Jane tell the story of their thinking about loose parts over time in the context of an evolving commitment to connecting children with the natural world.

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“The Crystal Stick of Egypt”
A discrepant event: introduction to the concept of “loose parts”

- Intrigued with and saddened by concept of “Nature Deficit” – e.g. Louv’s Last Child in the Woods (2008)
- Already committed to open-ended play (since 1974)
- Engaged in long-term effort to transform outdoor space (Nature Explore certification, 2012)
- Making a mental shift from “recess area” to “natural playscape” (Ogu & Schmidt, 2013)
- Emerging commitment to the idea of the natural environment as “third teacher” (Torquati & Ernst, 2013)
- Mary & Jane attend the Play Conference @ Clemson University in 2011
- They came back with the concept of “mud kitchen” – which they REALLY wanted to try
- 2012 they came back with the BIG aha about “loose parts” that provided a way for all of us to start putting all of this together
We already had:

- Gardening area (not yet fenced)
- Some commercially manufactured “loose parts” (blocks and 3-pc interlocking tunnel from Grounds for Play)
- Large climbing structure
- 2 playhouses
- Large sand area
- Long-term plan for adding interest areas to playground & apply for NatureExplore certification
Underway: program was applying for Nature Explore certification

- Installed a rock pond
- Created an outdoor music area with tree cookies & tree stumps
- Designated dirt pile for digging (archaeology)
- Relatively new handicapped-access additional smaller climber
- Plan for constructing “sitting wall”
- Creation of “gathering spaces”
We decided to focus on 5 consistent with theory of loose parts:

#1 – MUD KITCHEN

- Looked online for examples
- Made our own design & campus carpenters made & installed
- Pots/pans/utensils from yard sales
- Dirt, white sand, red clay
- Smooth stones
#2 Potting Bench (Sorting Area)

- Sorting bins insert made by carpenters (inspired by NatureExplore catalog items)
- Focus on natural materials
- Field trip to Dixie to gather items
- Collaborate with Grounds Department for ready source of branches, palm fronds, bamboo, etc.
- Corn cobs, pine cones, pieces of bark, SHELLS (native to our area) etc.
# 3 Fabric & Pillows

- Started with sheer drapery fabric to experiment with creating spaces underneath climber
- Bought 6 pcs from NatureExplore & later bought several more
- Kids have used them to make lots of things including tents, swings, and kid-sized bird nest
#4 Field trips for inspiration
#5 Additional loose parts to inspire creative pretend play

- Blocks
- Water channeling
- Tree stumps, logs
- Boulders/more rocks
- Tools (wheelbarrows, wagons, rakes, shovels, trowels, watering cans, buckets)
- Sidewalk chalk****
- Water & brushes

“A ghost trap” - Dante
Children’s play has gradually become highly integrated, with “parts” from different areas being used for elaborate and extended scenarios

“The Campsite”
“painting rocks so they will be pretty” – Violet
“Fairytopia”
“Monkey Joe’s Store” – Cameron (“I was making a cake”)
Another store....
Making a firepit

Water Ramps
(intended use)
Insights

- Understanding meaning of “work in progress”
- Establishing rules about care & storage is important – as a new play idea forms, they have to know where things are or it won’t develop
- Sidewalk chalk is essential
- Real items preferable to toys or plastic
- If they build it, they will play with it
- Access to water is essential
- Once play develops sufficiently, they won’t choose to play in the “scripted” areas anymore (e.g. playhouses)
- Loose parts facilitate transition to “games with rules” stage
- Decomposition of natural materials has inspired a whole category of play - “science of the rotting log....”
- Some materials seem like a good idea but just don’t work (e.g. deer corn!)

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At a recent staff meeting, while talking about “big ideas” we realized that:

“almost everything that happens in our classroom curriculum begins outside”
If you would like a copy of this presentation, you can access it on our website:

http://ecdc.cofc.edu