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Pete Ben-Attar

Mari Perez

L. Diane Parham

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# Loose Parts Playground at an Albuquerque Elementary School

Pete Ben-Attar, MOTS & Mari Perez, MOTS  
 Advisor: L. Diane Parham, PhD., OTR/L, FAOTA  
 University of New Mexico, School of Medicine

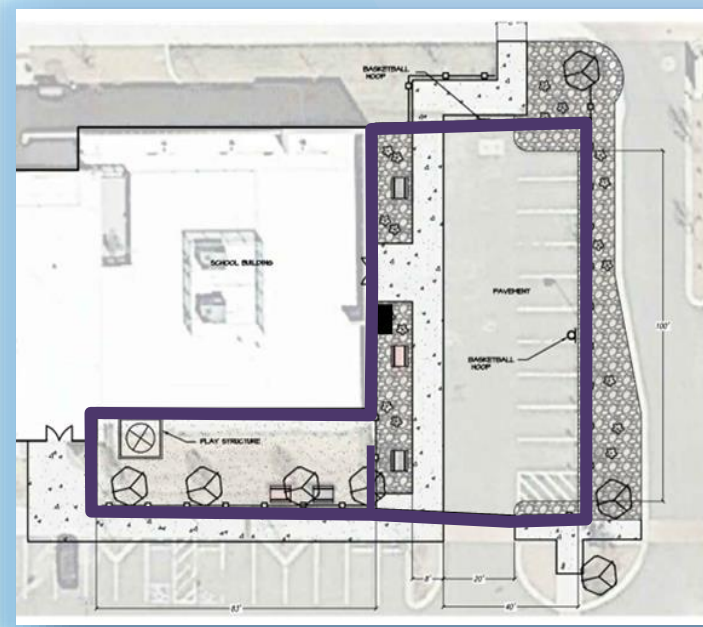


## PURPOSE

To establish a service learning project that will inform the design of a future study examining effects of a loose parts playground intervention on the play of elementary school children.

## PROCEDURES

**Location:** The New Mexico International School (NMIS)



- Current Playground Equipment:**
- 1 fixed play structure
  - 5 picnic tables
  - 2 basketball hoops

### Planning:

- School agrees to:
- Host the service learning project
  - Help gather play materials
  - Make materials available during recess times
  - Facilitate: storage, logistics, and safety

### Acquisition:

- Recycled items gathered from:
- Donations from students' families
  - Donations from school staff
  - UNM Occupational Therapy students and staff

### Observation:

- Will help determine amount and combination of play materials to elicit play from students.
- Four separate groups of students observed (each representative of a school grade level)
- Each group observed for 15-minutes during 30 minute lunchtime recess period, with loose parts readily available.

## BACKGROUND

Play is: Creative, enjoyable, freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated

- Play is the primary occupation of children and contributes to their: physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development
- Loose parts promote:
  - *Active play* – unstructured activities and behavior that children engage in
  - *Constructive play* – organized and goal-oriented form of active play where children create, invent, and build their own play environments; supports pretend play
  - *Socio-dramatic play* – type of pretend play allowing children to socialize, cooperate, and be creative in constructing and modifying their environment

Playgrounds types: Traditional, Contemporary, and Adventure (i.e., loose parts)

- Conventional/fixed playground equipment is costly and restrictive for play opportunities
- Loose parts playgrounds found to be developmentally beneficial and cost effective

Research has investigated: how it affects physical activity, how it supports the enjoyment of playground activities, and how it encourages different types of play

- Seven earlier studies focused on: Test of Playfulness (ToP), Body Mass Index (BMI), Physical Activity (PA), Social Interaction, Early Engineering Behaviors, and Quality of Life (QoL) as outcome measures

## LOOSE PARTS CRITERIA

1. They have no obvious play value.
2. They encourage cooperative, gross motor play.
3. They can be used in multiple ways.
4. They can be used in challenging, creative and uncertain ways.
5. They provide interesting sensory experiences.
6. Their inherent hazards are easily seen and managed by children of a targeted age.
7. They are all either recycled materials or made from recycled materials.

(Engelen et al., 2013)



## RESULTS

- Loose parts play materials were actively used by members of each elementary grade level.
- When used for play, some loose parts were more popular than others.
- As child age increased, use of certain items decreased.
- Items like the large tarp and open-ended cardboard barrel were popular across all age groups, eliciting active play involving gross motor movements.
- Items like the tires and the tarp were used in constructive play evoking socio-dramatic use.
- All of the introduced items were used at least once during the observation phase.



## CONCLUSIONS

- A future loose parts intervention study is feasible.
- Children spontaneously play actively with items not normally intended for play.
- Future research can focus on *Quality*, *Quantity*, and *Types* of play (i.e., physically active play, constructive play, and socio-dramatic play) as outcome measures.

## IMPLICATIONS

Introducing loose parts onto a playground may support the following play behaviors:

1. When given opportunities to do so, children are highly motivated to use loose parts as play materials to construct their own play spaces.
2. When directing their own play, children readily combine materials with no obvious play value in new and innovative ways.
3. Offering children materials that increase constructive play often leads to increases in dramatic and fantasy play experiences in children.