Are inequalities produced through the differential access to play opportunities at school? A call to level the playing field

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ABSTRACT

Children's play is characterized as pleasurable, but it is also viewed as critical for child health and well-being. Yet over the past decade, play researchers and advocates from various disciplines have suggested that there are decreasing opportunities for children to play, particularly at school. One concern is that the changing play environment in schools is reducing children's active play options and is thereby contributing to increases in childhood obesity. Building on findings from the *QUÉBEC Adipose and Lifestyle Investigation in Youth* (QUALITY), this commentary suggests that while opportunities to engage in physical activity may indeed be differentially shaped by school play environments, physical health may not be the only factor at stake in unequal play environments in schools. While this is not an altogether new concern, we argue that it is nevertheless important to highlight within physical activity research settings that children's overall well-being, including their experience of pleasure, creativity, imagination and sociability, is also shaped by a school's play environment. Addressing possible inequalities in children's experience of play in schools, we propose several questions and future research directions for addressing children's health and well-being in the school environment.

KEY WORDS: Play; child; physical activity; inequalities; health promotion; Canada

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While there is much debate about its definition, children's play is typically characterized as an activity that is pleasurable, spontaneous and engaging, it is defined as having no extrinsic goals, and is considered to often have a private reality or feature elements of make-believe.¹ Generally agreed upon is the critical role that playing has for children's health and well-being. However, over the past decade, discussions have emerged expressing concerns around children's play. For example, play advocates argue that children's unstructured, self-determined free play is being neglected or even removed from children's lives due, among other things, to an increasingly litigious culture, to fears around safety and to children's overscheduled lives.² Others suggest that outdoor play is on the decline because of the ubiquity and overwhelming appeal of electronic devices and screen-based activities.³ In the context of schools specifically, play researchers have also decried recent trends in which recess and leisure time is being replaced by academics.^{4,5}

These emerging debates have precipitated a surge of interest in, and awareness of the importance of, promoting children's opportunities for play, notably from within the fields of psychology and education. Recently, however, public health institutions in Canada have also begun to show increasing interest in children's play, particularly as it relates to rising rates of childhood obesity. Prompted by the belief that childhood obesity is in part a result of children's changing play landscapes, public health and physical activity promotion efforts have begun to advocate for play, and most explicitly for "active" play, in children's lives.⁶ One context in which new forms of active play are being promoted is in the school environment.^{7,8}

This commentary emerges from the "*QUÉBEC Adipose and Lifestyle Investigation in Youth*" (QUALITY), a longitudinal study examining the natural history of cardiovascular disease risk factors in children, one component of which investigates the role of schools for children's cardiovascular risk profiles.⁹ In this commentary, we advance questions with regard to the role of school environments specifically for children's play, and how this relates to children's health and well-being.

School environment and play

While discussions about play in schools are especially prevalent in the American context, there are growing debates in Canada around the amount of time and space that schools should dedicate to play during school hours.^{10,11} For instance, addressing reductions in recess-time in American schools, Ramstetter, Murray and Garner¹² conducted a comprehensive review of studies examining the role of recess for children. The authors suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, that recess is important especially for promoting opportunities for child physical activity, however they also emphasise that beyond physical health, "recess has the potential to affect the whole child – offering academic,

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cognitive, emotional, physical, and social benefits”¹², p. 518. Similar research on play in schools argues that there should not only be a focus on sports and competition in physical education programs, there also needs to be a greater inclusion of diverse forms of physically active play for it to be relevant to, and engaging for, all students.¹³

Because children spend a significant amount of their time in school, their opportunities for play and the ways in which they can engage in play are strongly shaped by the school environment. The approach a school adopts towards children’s play (e.g., spaces provided, time dedicated, diversity, and quality of equipment) will not only affect the opportunities to be physically active, but will also significantly shape children’s diverse experiences of playing.

What is at stake?

Several studies have indicated the critical role of school play equipment for children’s physical activity levels. For instance, one literature review examining the physical environment and children’s physical activity¹⁴ suggests that the availability of play and sports equipment or permanent play structures at school was associated with higher levels of physical activity among children. A recent systematic review¹⁵ also suggests that overall facilities and equipment available in schools (indoor and outdoor), and specifically the presence of “unfixed equipment” (p. 325) such as balls and skipping ropes, were positively associated with physical activity in children at recess time.¹⁵ As such, the specific characteristics of school sports and play environments are linked to differences in the physical health outcomes of children.

But is this all that is at stake in differential school playing environments? It is generally accepted that a school’s play environment influences more than children’s levels of physical activity, and that physical health outcomes and risks of obesity are not the only factors relevant in such discussions.¹⁶ Yet, we deem it important in the context of public health research and intervention to re-emphasize that children’s overall well-being (as linked to experiences of pleasure, opportunities for creativity and sociability) may also be significantly shaped by the school’s play environment.⁴ For instance, the time and the space to play freely, actively and *inactively*, both indoors and outdoors (e.g., reading, drawing, playing with bugs, daydreaming on swings), has been discussed as an important component of children’s enjoyment in play and their overall well-being.¹⁷ As such, obesity may only be the most obvious (i.e., tip of the iceberg) effect of a reduced or less diverse play environment at school.

There are undisputed and well-known benefits for children attending schools that endorse multiple breaks for recess and where substantial play opportunities are available. However, questions remain about the inequalities between schools with regard to the physical activity and play opportunities, and the subsequent inequalities that may thus emerge regarding children’s overall well-being. Although play equipment is not a requirement for children’s play activities at school or elsewhere, because the QUALITY study has inventoried schools and their school play equipment and environments in particular, we propose several questions and possible research directions regarding the availability and diversity of school play equipment and highlight that this may shape more than physical health outcomes.

QUESTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this section, we consider what other factors might be linked to play possibilities more generally. For instance, given the results from the QUALITY study that suggest that a school’s socio-economic status (SES) is associated with physical health outcomes for children,¹⁸ we would consider it relevant to examine whether a school’s SES may also be linked to the diversity of the play environment (i.e., outdoor and indoor spaces) and of the school’s play equipment (i.e., range of different types of play equipment allowing for diverse activities). Consequently, it may be pertinent to examine what other inequities (besides physical health) are produced or reinforced through such differences, as well as the ways to reduce such inequities.

We also consider it important to ask whether an explicit emphasis on competitive and structured physically active play (e.g., team sports, competitive active games) as part of the school play environment might sideline other relevant kinds of play and leisure for children. That is, might reduced opportunities for unstructured or free-play activities in favour of competitive sports or structured games have consequences for children’s opportunities (even capacities) to engage spontaneously, independently and creatively in play, and therefore affect the benefits associated with these forms of play?

The 2014 Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHKC) Report Card¹⁹ suggests that there are disparities in the kinds of play and physical activity environments different schools can offer. For instance, the AHKC Report Card reports findings from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI)²⁰ showing that schools with a smaller student population were less likely to report having a gymnasium or playing fields compared to larger schools, while larger schools generally reported having more types of sports facilities than schools with fewer students. On the other hand, larger schools had less access to areas with playground equipment during the school day. The diverse effects that such differences in school play environment might have on students’ overall well-being, through their different opportunities for free play, either active or *inactive*, have not been sufficiently examined.

A focus on physically active play and sports is clearly important for addressing concerns around childhood obesity in Canada. Indeed, recommendations are being made for school boards, administrators and principals to, where possible: “provide access to various locations and equipment for physical activity within the school and on the school grounds”¹⁹, p. 60 and to address the non-traditional physical activity needs of different groups of students (i.e., adolescent girls, culturally defined groups). However, a focus on play, as opposed to purely on physical activity, also necessitates attending to children’s experiences of pleasure and fun, and their opportunities for spontaneous, creative and unstructured play, both active and *inactive*. This might involve the creation of quiet corners or treed areas for reading or drawing outside, or the introduction of inexpensive materials, not specific to a particular sport or game, that allow children to engage with items in creative and spontaneous ways (e.g., sticks, rocks, chalk, ropes, old tires, old clothes, etc.), an approach promoted by UNICEF for urban environments more generally.²¹

In attempting to answer these questions, one direction for research might be to help provide a more detailed and data-driven

portrait which could indicate what types of schools have what sorts of play environments (i.e., materials and spaces), and what forms of play are, as a consequence, engaged in, more or less frequently, by children. Examining the possible consequences that inequalities in school environments might have for children – including, but above and beyond physical health – may be another important and fruitful avenue for future research.

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RÉSUMÉ

Le jeu des enfants est caractérisé comme étant non seulement plaisant, mais essentiel à leur santé et à leur bien-être. Pourtant, depuis une dizaine d'années, les chercheurs et les défenseurs du jeu dans diverses disciplines indiquent que les enfants ont de moins en moins d'occasions de jouer, particulièrement à l'école. L'un des problèmes est que l'environnement de jeu dans les écoles réduit les options de jeu actif pour les enfants et contribue donc aux augmentations de l'obésité juvénile. Inspiré des constatations de l'enquête *Québec Adipose and Lifestyle Investigation in Youth* (QUALITY), notre commentaire suggère qu'il est vrai que les occasions de faire de l'activité physique peuvent varier selon les environnements de jeu des écoles, mais que ces inégalités ne touchent pas uniquement la santé physique. Le problème n'est pas entièrement nouveau, mais nous faisons valoir qu'il est néanmoins important de souligner, dans les milieux de recherche sur l'activité physique, que le bien-être global des enfants, y compris leur expérience du plaisir, de la créativité, de l'imagination et de la sociabilité, se construit aussi par l'environnement de jeu de leur école. Étant donné les inégalités possibles dans l'expérience de jeu des enfants à l'école, nous proposons plusieurs questions et pistes de recherche futures pour aborder la santé et le bien-être des enfants en milieu scolaire.

MOTS CLÉS : jeu; enfant; activité physique; inégalités; promotion de la santé; Canada