

The Riskiness of the Playground

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Risk is described, not as a negative attribute of children's playground activity, but more positively, as challenge and adventure to which children can actively respond. Risk refers to something that is being accomplished by children, some intended activity which expands their sense of the world. Such a positive sense of risk is developed by showing that the riskiness of the playground is a reflection of our concerns for the safety of children and their proper supervision. I describe, in particular, how we might observe children closely and how we might take responsibility for the risky situations in which children find themselves. In so doing, I present a way of understanding how we can bring an underlying sense of security to children's feelings for the playground and for the risks that can be taken there.

Les activités des enfants, surtout sur les terrains de jeux, comportent un facteur de risque. C'est ce qui justifie, chez l'adulte responsable, la préoccupation pour la sécurité des enfants. Pourtant, du point de vue des enfants, la situation de risque peut être une occasion d'apprendre à relever des défis, de goûter l'aventure et de s'ouvrir sur le monde. Pour que les enfants puissent profiter des activités des terrains de jeux, il faut trouver les moyens de leur fournir la surveillance qui leur assurera la sécurité dont ils ont besoin pour risquer de s'aventurer dans le monde.

The notion of the *playground* opens up at least two lines of inquiry. First, it contains the suggestion that the physical locale where children behave in a "free, spontaneous, nonserious and joyful manner" should be considered (Ellis, 1973, p. 14). The playground, that area where children play, becomes of interest because of the distinctive type of activity that occurs there. To the extent that play is held up as being of value psychologically, sociologically, anthropologically, and so forth, it is a place of psychological, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, even philanthropic and antiquarian interest. To the extent that the quality of children's play is thought to be a function of the actual design of the playground, it is also a place of architectural interest. In fact, the preference for a certain type of playground, for example, an adventure playground rather than a more traditional one (Frost, 1985), would seem to reflect an interest in designing the perfect play experience for children (Hill, 1980).

Now I do not want to disregard this line of thinking about playgrounds, although there is always the danger of misunderstanding the rationale behind

playgrounds. Playgrounds are not just places designed for play, regardless of how broadly the idea of play is defined; they are also presumed to be good places for children. In fact, playgrounds represent an implicit connection, and one which is borne out etymologically, between play and children (Krell, 1972, p. 77). Ontologically speaking, "playing brings a fullness to the child's being that is otherwise lacking and forms the fundamental world that will otherwise be taken for granted. In childhood play, the fundamental and primordial relation to being is formed and remains rooted . . ." (Vandenberg, 1971, p. 46). Play, "that ontological mode essential to the development of human culture and even more, to the development of the evolving child" (Polakow, 1982, p. 21), stands out as that which best characterizes what it means to be child-like. Accordingly, when we look at playgrounds we not only look at children at play, but at that which the idea of play signifies and symbolizes. The playground, provided it is a good place to play, lets us look at the meaning of childhood.

Playgrounds represent a space for thinking about children. Perez and Hart (1980) make a similar point in discussing what they regard as a narrow interest in enhancing the design of playgrounds so as to maximize their use. They argue that "children — not playgrounds — should be the basis for planning" (p. 253). They ask, "What can be said from present knowledge of the development of children and from the behavior of their caregivers about the environmental opportunities which need to be created for children?" (p. 253). While sympathetic to the design project in which those like Perez and Hart are engaged, I believe that thinking about children on playgrounds requires a greater measure of self-reflection than that which is needed for planning and designing playgrounds. The question of the nature of this space begs understanding of what makes the playground, or any other place for that matter, seem a place for children. And there is the supplementary question of why we should, as adults, even be interested in such places and how it is that we are in a position to observe their "specialness" (Langeveld, 1983; Polakow and Sherif, 1988).

"What is 'place'?" asks Moore (1980), another playground designer. "To me, it is a means for integrating knowledge of the world into human relationships. It is a currency of belonging — a hierarchy of intersecting social and physical geographies" (p. 59). In other words, places like playgrounds provide a "landscape of childhood" — landscape as "a construct of the mind as well as a physical and measurable entity" (Tuan, 1979, p. 6). The playground not only provides a place for thinking about children, but also symbolizes how we think about children. It is our special place almost as much as it is the child's. Accordingly, the behavior of children and their caregivers in that particular physical location defined as a playground cannot be viewed solely in terms of the design of that play space; the question remains as to what makes that space interesting, that is, a child's place and a place where childhood can be recalled. Thus, inquiry into the notion of the playground requires not only considering the design aspect that distinguishes playgrounds from other human spaces, but also examining our own sense of a

child's place in the world that a playground affords. It requires considering the grounds for thinking about children.

My contention is that playgrounds provide an opening, a *topos*, a multi-dimensional space where seemingly disparate events can be gathered together to connote a network of interaction between adults and children. The notion of *play* has served to denote this interaction and mask it at the same time (Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984). Certain activities have been shown to be of interest without the basis for our interest in them having been disclosed, and some activities have been ear-marked as being of more value than others, again without it having been made clear upon what basis a preference might be given. Consequently, I prefer to stay with the notion of the *playground* with its topographical orientation, its implication of an expressive and interrogative space which might provide clarification of childhood existence. I prefer to ask: What is the nature of this place? What view of life does it allow? And how might the adult's presence affect the development of such a view? Clues to answering these questions may be found in a review of the playground-related literature where it may be possible to show how the notion of risk serves better than the notion of play in capturing this potentially *pedagogical* sense of the playground. Here, I will attempt to show that risk is actually a more important notion than play in understanding the playground. And by implication, I will show how risk is also more important than play in understanding all pedagogy.

The Safety of the Playground

Historically, an interest in children coupled with a concern for their safety led to the development of playgrounds as places set apart from the traffic of adult life. In reference to the proliferation of what we now regard as the traditional playground:

It seeks to provide a place for play where the children can go during their leisure time, and be off the street and away from the evil influences which they might encounter there, and under the constructive leadership of trained directors.

(Curtis, 1917, p. 19)

Nevertheless, this relatively recent interest in the safety of children cannot be equated directly with an interest in children themselves. Wood (1977), in denouncing the very idea of a playground, refers to what the Opies had to say about past attitudes to children playing too near adults.

Children always do seem to have been in trouble about the places where they played. In the nineteenth century there were repeated complaints that the pavements of London were made impassible by children's shuttlecock and tipcat. In Stuart times, Richard Steele reported, the vicinity of the Royal Exchange was infested with uninvited sportsmen, and a beadle was employed to whip away the "unlucky Boys with Toys and Balls." Even in the Middle Ages, when it might be supposed a meadow was within reach of every Jack and Jill in Britain, the young had a way of gravitating to unsuitable places. In 1332 it was found necessary to prohibit boys and others from playing in the precincts of the Palace

of Westminster while parliament was sitting. In 1385 the Bishop of London was forced to declaim against the ball-play about St. Paul's; and in 1447, away in Devonshire, the Bishop of Exeter was complaining of "yong peple" playing in the cloister, even during divine service, such games as "the toppe, queke, penny prykke, and most atte tenys, by which the walles of the saide Cloistre have be defowled and the glas wyndowes all to brost." (Opie and Opie, 1969, p. 11)

Wood concludes that the idea of the playground is actually a convenient way of not being bothered by children.

By getting the kids out of the streets, out of the yards — out of the hair — and into the playgrounds, adults were thinking not so much of the kids as of themselves. It was the automobile that made it possible, for the first time, to disguise this selfishness under the sanctimonious skirts of pretended concern for the safety of children. (1977, p. 235)

Now I think that Wood is only partly correct in this conclusion, especially since the concern for safety does not stop at the idea of a playground. There is concern for the design of safe playgrounds. For instance, the leader to Lady Allen of Hurtwood's article extolling the virtues of the Danish experiment in Adventure Playgrounds, which appeared in the November 1946 *Picture Post*, referred to the dangers of bombed-out play sites. Readers were asked, "Why not make them safe places to play in?" (Bengtsson, 1972, p. 25). If an interest in playgrounds were simply a disguise for adult indifference to children, then why would adults be so concerned about the safety of playgrounds and the safety of children on playgrounds?

Perhaps the development of safe playgrounds expressed an emerging valuation of children. For instance, Zelizer (1985) argues that the disappearance of the street hearth of play (Zerner, 1977) actually indicates an increasingly sentimentalized view of children's lives. The establishment of supervised playgrounds and the subsequent limitations that were imposed upon the so-called spontaneous children's games that existed in the past did not so much stifle childhood as bring the notion of childhood to prominence. That is, getting children off the streets was based upon concern for the physical and social dangers that threatened their safety (Zelizer, 1985, pp. 33-36); this concern, Zelizer says, was part of a more pervasive cultural change in the way children have come to be valued. Consider in this regard the nostalgia sometimes expressed for the games that once existed beyond adult control and were presumably "played for no other reason than pleasure" (Postman, 1982, p. 4). Zelizer would say that this nostalgia is itself part of the sentimentalizing of childhood, and reflects an attitude to the supposed innocence of childhood that now allows for an investment in the lives of children, and for the high degree of adult control and supervision of children's play that is reflected in the present-day concern for playground safety.

Today, school playgrounds, home backyards, rumpus rooms, community pools, playing fields, ice arenas, gymnasias, even water parks and thrill centers, are preferred by parents as places for their children to play over more traditional and

perhaps more alluring places such as streets, vacant lots, woodland areas, streams, other water courses, and "such dangerous and forbidden places as sandpiles and quarries" (Hart, 1979, p. 334). Safe playgrounds, even playgrounds per se, are increasingly defined as those areas that are limited spatially and that allow the adult's view — that lie within the adult's purview. They are places designed with children in mind; that is, they are designed according to the view that childhood needs to be protected and secured.

Of course, it would be unreasonable to argue against the safety of playgrounds; however, this does not mean that the implied concern for the safety of children need be accepted unquestioningly. It may be that this concern, and the adult view from which it draws, places unnecessary limitations upon the child's experience of the world. It may be that the concern for the safety of children, expressed in the provision of playgrounds, actually makes us increasingly insensitive to the child's place in a risky world. In fact, Van den Berg provides real cause for concern when he claims that the safety of the playground attests to the exile of children from an adult world. He says:

He who wants to see with his own eyes the separateness of the child's world, who wants to observe how the child is put down (lovingly) in a space of its own, cannot do better than visit a playground. He will have to adjust his eyes to the observation of certain peculiarities. Or rather, he must take off the glasses which make all inevitabilities seem acts of love. What he will then observe is . . . a fenced-in space, an island in the middle of the mature world, an island of comparative safety in a fatal maturity, an island of (necessary) exile. (1975, pp. 94, 95)

Yet, lest we feel secure in what we have provided for children in terms of well-designed playgrounds, Van den Berg goes on to indicate the damage that occurs under the weight of such gestures of benevolence.

When the child ventures on the street — he must go to school and home again — he has to be armed against the dangers he will meet. The grownups have given him a crossing guard. The children wait on the pavement until their little group has grown big enough, then the guard puts up his hand, the traffic stops, and the group of exiles hurry to the other side of the street. No sooner is the last child off the street than the waiting traffic accelerates and hurries on.

A group of exiles? The thought that we are good for the children is more agreeable; so good are we that we lend them the attributes of maturity to defend themselves. Look, there they go; everybody stops; the business man whose time is money, the large truck, whose delay can be expressed in hard cash — everybody stops for the children. Are we not good to them? Doubtless we are, but it is the least we can do; we are obliged to be good to them, because of the great amount of irreparable evil we have done. Our goodness pays for a great injustice. (1975, p. 95)

Seen in this light, the safety of the playground becomes a troublesome notion, especially when we are reminded by Slukin (1981; 1987) that growing up in the playground often entails subjection to the threats and intimidations of older children and, in general, submission to a brutal order that overrides the design of

playgrounds as places where children can safely be by themselves. A fairly common situation is that of one child being threatened by another and then having to find a way out of being drawn into a fight. For example:

Ivan (9:7) grabs Graeme (9:3):

Ivan: I'm going to smash your face in (knees him in the stomach).

Graeme does not react, then smiles and says: I'm going to let you off this time.

(Slukin, 1981, p. 38)

A recent initiative designed to make playgrounds safe from bullying and victimization involves teaching playground etiquette as a subject in elementary school classrooms (Davidson & Seligman, 1987). Here we have an attempt to ensure the playground's safety by telling children how to behave there, an attempt which would seem to express an adult longing for the type of playground Van Den Berg (1975) describes as "an island of comparative safety in a fatal maturity" (p. 95). Such an attempt should certainly give us cause for concern as we wonder about the need to "lend them [children] the attributes of maturity" (Van Den Berg, 1975, p. 95) so as to ensure their safety on the playground. One wonders if, under the guise of playground safety, we have not merely substituted one rigid order, albeit an adult-sanctioned one, for another. Still we must ask: What has this concern for playground safety achieved for the child?

The Supervision of Children

In order for there to be a real measure of safety in what children do on playgrounds it is necessary that their playground activity be properly understood. The safety of playground activity is not the absence of risk, nor is it simply a matter of the successful management of risk. The designers of playgrounds have been quick to point out that:

It is possible to create an environment which is almost perfectly safe simply by avoiding risk. The problem is, however, that such a setting would not make a good play environment because it would lack many of those elements necessary for meaningful play; variety, complexity, challenge, risk, flexibility, adaptability, etc. Quite simply, such a playground would go largely unused. Indeed, this is the case with many of the traditional playgrounds now in existence. They are not being heavily used because children do not like them; they are neither fun nor challenging. Incidentally, this also gives them the appearance of being safe. Few accidents are reported because few people use them. (Wilkinson & Lockhart, 1980, p. 87)

The safety of the playground hinges more on the view of things that happen when the playground is in use. Safety requires overseeing children's activity, inspecting what it is that they are doing. It requires the supervision of playground activity.

Supervision is a defining of children's activity, a bounded way of observing children, a framing of one's thought about them. Supervision is a measure of the safety of the playground. Perhaps it is not totally out of hand to say that:

Playgrounds themselves are really nothing other than places that have been set aside for children. They're not safe; they're not special; they're really just the marked out areas that it's okay to be in. Anyplace else you're going to get hassled: "Hey, kid, don't hang around the store. Go get someplace that you belong." Well, the only place a kid belongs is the playground. (Beckworth & Hewes, 1974, p. 64)

In order to recognize the safety (and the specialness) of the playground, it is necessary to stand in a certain relation to it and to see this place as somewhere a child belongs. It is necessary, some would say, to supervise the child's activity. Thus, early playgrounds had adult play supervisors, and adventure playgrounds were conceived as requiring playground leaders. Now contemporary playgrounds yield to summer playground programs under the direction of trained recreation workers. The point to be recognized about playground supervision, however, is that in spite of defining playground activity quite narrowly and confirming children's activity within an adult view, it also holds out the possibility of truly seeing the child.

To see the child rather than simply to view his or her activity according to preconceived categories of adult interest means bringing to light that which makes the events of a playground of interest and that which cuts deeper than the verdict that children are playing in safety. We need to look at playground activity, not with any preconceived framework which would make our looking into a set view, but rather with a certain attitude that is mindful of our involvement, even as observers, in the situation at hand. In effect, it is necessary to suspend certain theoretical as well as practical interests in playground spaces and explicate what motivates our urge to supervise playground activity. Some time ago Herbart wrote:

Perhaps it has been my misfortune to witness too many examples of the effect of strict supervision in public institutions . . . Suffice it briefly to remember that punctilious and constant supervision is burdensome alike to the supervisor and those he watches over, and is apt therefore to be associated on both sides with deceit, and thrown off at every opportunity — and also that the need for it grows with the degree in which it is used, and that at last every moment of its intermittence is fraught with danger. Further, it prevents children from knowing and testing themselves, and learning a thousand things which are not included in any pedagogic system, but can only be found by self-search. (1806, pp. 97-98)

Here, it seems to me, is the crux of the matter. The safety of children that is bought through a preoccupation with their strict supervision may eventually put them at risk, because this single-minded concern would deny the risks that are a natural and inevitable part of their activity. This supervisory concern would also deny the adult's part in helping the child take risks in relative safety.

Strict supervision means that the child is far too conscious of the adult's approval of safe action. Consider our own reflections of how a feeling of being supervised and hence being only a "kid" outweighed any benefit from being seen by the adult in attendance. In fact, recollections of favorite times on the

playground tend to revolve around those times when we "had it to ourselves" and could try things that might not necessarily meet the approval of adults. But did we really have it to ourselves? Or was this sense of being in charge of our destiny really a result of a much less overbearing, far more subtle, adult presence? After all, children will invite adults to join their playground activity provided that the adults are kindly disposed towards them and prepared to enter into the spirit of their activity. Or as Lindsay (1984) concluded from his study of playground activity:

We can learn much about children, the way they think and their developmental stages, by observing them at play in a child's world. Not only is there a bond between players, but teachers who show an interest in the games are immediately welcomed even though they are adults. This is one very effective way for teachers to achieve rapport with a class, and the thrill of acceptance by being invited to join a game can be as satisfying for the teacher or visitor as it is for the "new kid on the block." (p. 11)

While strict supervision suggests a failure to understand the nature of the risks of the playground, the idea of supervision still allows for the possibility of seeing this riskiness in a more pedagogical way.

There is a riskiness to the playground that undercuts our attempts, through the design of the playground apparatus and the supervision of activities allowed on this apparatus, to ensure the safety of children. This riskiness is not antithetical to the child's safety; rather, we need to look at the child on the playground in such a way that our concern for playground safety might disclose the risk-taking that seems to be so much a part of the child's coming to terms with playground things and the things that the playground represents. We need to consider supervision for the sake of a child's safety in light of the more fundamental aspect of that child's propensity for taking risks.

The Observation of Children

If we really want to assess the riskiness of the playground, perhaps we should at least sit close by, watching what children do there. As Barrett (1972) says in words that apply nicely to this study:

Perhaps we have only enough energy and interest to sit on a park bench in the sunlight. But a world may be discovered there that has been screened off from our previous high-strung and overambitious consciousness. (p. 275)

By the same token, we should be mindful also of what our proximity to the child implies. Remember that Walt Disney also sat on a park bench watching his children at play. In the process he dreamed up Disneyland.

"It all started when my daughters were very young, and I took them to amusement parks on Sunday," he told me. "I sat on a bench eating peanuts and looking all around me. I said to myself, dammit, why can't there be a better place to take your children, where you can have fun together?" (Thomas, 1976, p. 11)

His watching led to a design for children and adults that overlooked the riskiness of the playground altogether. Of course we, too, have designs for children. The question is: To what extent might our designs open up the possibility of a relation to children that goes beyond the supervisory? More specifically, how might our concern for the riskiness of the playground bring us closer to an understanding of how we should stand, or sit, in relation to children?

Consider the ubiquitous park bench: brightly-painted seats set into concrete slabs that border the traditional playgrounds, or lower benches and forms that tend to blend in with the construction materials used in the newer creative and designer playgrounds. But no matter how unobtrusive the design and placement, the park bench signifies a certain distance of the adult from the child. The bench is a place for sitting down and taking a relaxed view of what the child is doing. The well-placed bench is meant to give the adult a sense of security, not only about the safety of the child, but also about the way in which one feels comfortable as an adult in a place that is ostensibly for children. The latter aspect is not so much a feeling of physical comfort (although who would deny the need for that?) as it is a feeling of correctness about one's place on the playground. It may well be that sitting with the child on one of the platforms of the playground apparatus is just as physically comfortable as sitting on the park bench, while standing on the platform at the top of the slide area is possibly more comforting in terms of safety. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency for the adult to move away from these positions as if it is not proper to be seen there. At a community swimming pool, for example, the sign on the slide clearly states that only children under eight years of age can use this equipment. The unwary adult who climbs up the ladder behind his or her young child is soon made aware of this rule by the attendant with the megaphone on the far side of the pool. Similarly, some outdoor playgrounds have signs that ensure that adults stay in their designated place on the park bench.

The park bench is also something upon which children do not generally play; it is something which they approach only when wishing to break away from the activity at hand to seek consolation, reassurance, or some other contact with the adult sitting there. The child rushes over from the swings, pulling and tugging at the coat that now seems too hot to be worn, and as he comes near he flings the coat in the direction of the bench, turns on his heels, and races back to the swings. He knows the bench is not there to be played upon; it is simply placed there to ensure the comfort of his activity. Another child approaches in tears, having been treated roughly by one of her playmates. She sits for a while beside the adult on the bench and finds some solace in the detachment of this place from those who caused her injury. But before too long she becomes restless, hearing once again the noises of those on the playground. She pauses a moment longer, unsure whether or not to leave this protective place, until she hears her name called by one of the children. All is forgiven, the bench has served its purpose, and the child re-enters the playground.

The park bench thus signifies more than a physical proximity to the child. It signifies the nature of the adult's relation to the child without necessarily foreclosing the possibilities of this relation. From a design perspective, the important consideration will be that of the proper placement of park benches. Let me cite one exaggerated example of the designer's concern.

When a mother arrives at a playground with her child, she is usually already footweary. She has no doubt pushed or pulled or carried a carriage, a stroller, a large bundle of toys, something to drink or eat for Junior, her knitting or a book — perhaps for part of the way she has even had to carry the child. And she has juggled these various difficulties while making her way across busy streets, keeping hand and eye on the child, and watching out for traffic. If this young mother has two young children with her, the problems are fourfold. It is no harder for this mother to let down her guard against potential danger once ensconced on a playground bench than it is for the long-haul automobile driver to be inclined to doze off while driving. It is a reflex which one cannot completely control. Many accidents happen because she is such a long way away from her child that the imminent danger is not apparent until too late. (Aaron & Winawer, 1965, p. 68)

For these writers, the design concern is that children should be supervised “at a range close enough for control” (p. 68). To be open to the possibilities of the adult-child relation on the playground, however, it is necessary to look beyond supervision, which means questioning the meaning of the park bench — that which is intended in its design. Like the seating in a theatre, it is possible to choose where one sits in relation to children on the playground, to see the things they do in a many-sided way as in theatre-in-the-round, and even to take part in the drama which unfolds. But beyond the issues of control and supervision, the deeper issue of the park bench is that it brings to the fore the significance of the adult's presence on the playground, and the question of how he or she should be present at the child's activity. The adult is not a mere supervisor of children's playground activity, but rather a keen observer of what children can and cannot do, of their fears and difficulties, of the danger and challenge of their activities. The adult can come to see risk in the context of the playground with a mindfulness of the child. Although the playground, as an adult construction, gives certain visible evidence of the adult's presence, still there is a need to have the child feel this presence in a way that makes the playground a place of responsible risk-taking. So, although one needs to be in a position to see the child, the more important issue pertains to how one tries to observe fully how it is that the child can learn to take risks in safety.

The task is not only to look at the child, but also to take note of how the child is placed. Observing means looking with care. “The word ‘observing’ has etymological connections to ‘preserving, saving, regarding, protecting.’ The teacher serves the child by observing from very close proximity while still maintaining distance” (van Manen, 1986, p. 19). This is what the park bench allows. And yet, to appreciate fully the significance of the park bench, it is necessary to see it as a means of observing children in a particular manner. Beets

(van Manen, 1979) outlines the ways this significance might be appreciated. He describes various situations of watching young children playing soccer and highlights the different ways in which we might observe what is going on. In the first case, Beets writes about the adult who just happens to be passing by a soccer field. This person can become interested for a while in what is happening there, yet he or she can just as easily leave the situation behind without having had any real effect upon the children's play. In the second case, Beets refers to the adult observer who is known to the children in more than a passing sort of way. As a coach perhaps, or as mother or father of one of the children, the adult is in a position to observe the children in a far more engaged and responsible manner. Even so, this kind of observation still leaves room for a deeper pedagogical stance.

There is a third form of "observing." I pass by the schoolyard; I could be the school psychologist, a counsellor, or maybe a home-room teacher who has special responsibilities for these children. They know me and I know them. When I stand still and watch while they are playing, I am an outsider in a certain sense, since now I observe them from a scientific or an educational vantage point of "pedagogue" or "diagnosticus." But I am also involved, since I am and feel that I am responsible for their education. I stand beside the parent — on the side of the educators. Now I observe in a special manner, however. I have learned to adopt a scientific vantage point and my observing is observation from that "vision." (van Manen, 1979, p. 8)

These contrasting attitudes are not only different stances taken up by the passer-by, the father/coach or the pedagogue, they also express different forms of interaction between children and their observers. They are different ways of responding to the children's activity. Accordingly, the significance of the well-placed bench is that it not only enables the child on the playground to be seen, but it also places the adult in the midst of the child's activity and calls upon his or her ability to respond to what he or she sees happening there. Borrowing from a more technicist language, it allows for skillful handling of the child where:

A skillful observer develops sensitivity to the uniqueness of personality and becomes increasingly able to interpret the language of behavior. For parents and teachers, the ability to fix attention on one child at a time makes it possible to look more deeply into that child's idiomatic behavior for clues to understanding the significance of his actions, his gestures, his facial expression, his spoken words, and the tempo of his day-to-day living. (Dowley, 1969, p. 517)

In effect, the well-placed bench puts the adult into a situation where he or she can observe pedagogically the significance of the child's activity on the playground. It allows for "being a child-watcher who keeps in view the total existence of the developing child" (van Manen, 1986, p. 18).

Risky Situations

From the park bench I see two small girls on a circular slippery slide. One stands at the top while the other straddles the raised edge of the slide, and starting

at the bottom, begins to pull herself up the slide by gripping under the edge and allowing her outside leg to dangle freely. "This is fun," she says to her friend at the top. "Why don't you try it?" Now half-way up, she decides to try something new. "Hey, watch what I can do!" Standing on the edge and then bracing herself with her arms against the pillar around which the slide curves, she edges up further. Her friend at the top, however, becomes perturbed by what she sees. Her concern shows even more as the adventurous one reaches the casing that covers the top of the slide — the curved plastic casing that offers no purchase for this girl and that has no guard rail to stop her from slipping over the edge and falling down onto the packed sand below — the casing that this girl is presently trying to climb over.

I have been watching what these girls are doing and now I, too, am concerned for the child who is at this moment precariously situated on the top of the slide. In fact, I am concerned for them both, because both of them find the situation risky, albeit in decidedly different ways. The little girl standing at the top is scared by the antics of her friend, while the other child finds herself in a danger that she had not been able to anticipate nor one over which she can now exert some control. Her bravado, her attempt to impress her friend, and I suspect, myself, has prevented her from appreciating the inevitable consequence of what she does.

As I watch these two little girls, I feel responsible for what has now transpired. I have not shown either of them "what is the nature of mature adulthood toward which she is striving" (van Manen, 1979, p. 14). I have not helped them see a risk that is not necessarily a likely danger. An action component is missing from this situation, quite apart from the action of stopping the child from climbing up the slide. Unfortunately it is too late to act in any way. The child falls off the slide. My heart stops as I see her sprawled on the ground. A slight relief — she starts crying as I rush over to where she lies. I am relieved — although the little girl has fallen heavily, fortunately she has suffered only some minor bruising. I help her up, allowing her to hobble around for a little while, before she and her friend head off to the swings. But as I return to the park bench, having done my job of consoling her after the fall, I feel more than a little responsible for what has happened and for what may well have been a more serious injury. I should have stepped in before the child put herself in danger, before a fall became imminent, although I am not at all sure, even now, that preventing the child from going further up the slide would have been the best action to take. What would my concern for danger do for the child who watches from the top in a state of concern? How would she be helped by my pointing out the danger that lurks in the playground? On the other hand, the vitality has gone from the little girls' movements. I watch them now on the swings and I cannot help but think that something has been lost for these girls as a result of the fall and the lack of observance of that which led up to it. The children have gained an awareness of safety at the expense of an awareness of risk. A potential opportunity to teach them, and for me to learn, about the nature of risk has been lost.

This situation shows that, while the park bench provides a measure of security for the child, at times it obscures the difference between watching and truly observing the child's activity. At times it is necessary to step onto the playground and address face-to-face the question of risk, the question which defines the boundaries of the playground, the question which makes the playground interesting, and the question which asks how we might observe what children do there. The young children on the slippery slide need not so much appreciate the potential (and in this case, actual) danger in the situation at hand, as to see the risk involved in what they are doing. Well before the likelihood of mishap, the adult must be able to assist the child and be in a position to do so. In addition, there must be something about the adult's positioning on the playground that enables the riskiness of the activity to become clearer to the child. In other words, the adult who has the ability to see the riskiness of the young child climbing up the slide, who sees the fear this strikes in the heart of the little girl watching from the top, who sees that the motivation for this risky activity depends very much upon the responses of those who stand nearest, this adult must acknowledge the decisive moment of his or her positioning on the playground. Are we there simply to watch the child, to dare the child? Or does the fact that we are in attendance mean the situation is potentially a pedagogical one?

By seeing the pedagogic potential in an ordinary or everyday life situation, the educator converts by way of a pedagogic intention some incidental subject or problem situation into a situation where a certain question or problem becomes a critical one for the young person. This is made possible due to the special tension that exists in the pedagogic relation between the more mature adult and the less mature young person. As a result of this tensional relation the young person finds him- or herself in a situation where he or she must act, choose, or decide with respect to some question or problem — and this acting (learning) lifts the young person (student) to a higher level of being (*einen Aufschwung des Seins*). (van Manen, 1987, pp. 22-23)

There is risk in the situation involving the girl climbing up the slippery slide, yet it is the observer's awareness of this risk that can create a literal upswing (*Aufschwung*) in the children being together on the playground, thereby transforming the situation pedagogically. The children on the slide look to the adult who sits on the park bench. Now that this vantage point is sighted, it creates a site for their explorations. The adult is caught in a situation where he or she can either stay seated and leave the children to their own devices, or where the child's glance can be acknowledged and the riskiness of the situation drawn out. Either way, a decision has been made.

To this extent, a useful distinction can be made between position and situation:

Taken in a very broad sense, we define "position" as the living environment of man, the totality of all the circumstances that influence him in a stimulating as well as restraining way. All life — not only human, but also animal life as well — finds itself at each moment in a determinate position. This position itself can then be of a very heterogeneous nature: it can mean pressure, and stimulate man's efforts to change his living conditions, but it may be as well a position of

rest, in which he feels well and which he by no means plans to change. In contrast with this, we define "situation" as a determinate critical position, namely a position that places man before the necessity of making a decision. Situation, therefore, designates a position in which man has to make a determinate choice between different possibilities that offer themselves to him, and to organize his life in harmony with this choice. (Bollnow, 1972, p. 376)

Of course not every instance of playground activity requires that something decisive happen on our part. One must be sensitive to the difference between critical instances and those which are not, since pedagogy fails as much at the extreme of investing absolutely everything with momentous significance as it does at the other extreme of seeing nothing at all as decisive. The truth of the matter may be that the most important decision is the one to be there for the sake of the child's explorations. This decision potentially circumscribes not only a position, a posture towards playground activity, but also a situation that gives meaning to the particular decisions one might make regarding what to do with the children one faces. This decision to observe children's playground activity creates a situation in which one is implicated no matter what one decides to do in specific instances. This decision creates a situation of responsibility for children.

We are somehow responsible for the child's falling off the slippery slide, although not necessarily in any culpable way. Like many other playground incidents, this incident could have been avoided. From the sidelines we see that slippery slides as well as climbing frames, swings, ladders, beams, and bars pose a challenge for children and require them to take risks. We see dares, challenges, contests, and games take place around these playground things and become part of the awareness of risk. And we see this happen in all sorts of playgrounds, even playgrounds where things appear to be quite safe. Yet as we observe more closely we see that safe playgrounds only make sense in light of the question of risk. The consideration of the riskiness of the playground is thus not so much a matter of watching particular situations as a matter of seeing our place within those situations and ensuring that this place holds out the possibility of bringing a sense of security to the child's explorations.

How do we do this? How are we to take up such a position of responsibility? We need to be aware that the riskiness of the playground points beyond the situation at hand. The incident of the two young children on the slippery slide, for instance, says something about children's experience of risk and something about an adult's response; however, it attests to a more pervasive meaning of risk that is compressed within this particular situation. In the words of Buytendijk:

Any analysis of human relations must be part of the more extensive analysis of the meaningful structure which we call a "situation." I can have a living experience of fear or distress but I know only *that* I am afraid or sad. I do not know *what* fear or distress are. To know this, I must interpret the conduct and its supporting "situation" which in turn depends upon the emotion. I must interpret the *meaning* of man's dialogue. And I must understand this dialogue as an "historical idea" in a situation that has become its own. (Buytendijk, 1958, p. 109)

Hence we need to reconsider playground situations where risk appears. We need to discern within these situations important questions pertaining to children's fears and difficulties, and questions pertaining to the place of danger, challenge, and adventure in children's lives. We need to raise questions that have to do with what we should or should not do for children when a sense of risk pervades their activity. How can children be taught to take risks in safety? How can parents and teachers enable children to become responsible risk-takers? These are important questions to ask in specific instances. But ultimately this questioning of the riskiness of the playground is a questioning of our relation to children within the context of a precarious social-historical world. It is a questioning of what we should do for and with children for the sake of their continued movement toward becoming responsible themselves for the risky texture of life itself.

Conclusion

The playground is thus a unique place for addressing the meaning of risk in a child's life. It is designed to shield children from the risks that lie beyond it; yet, not surprisingly, we cannot totally minimize the risks of the playground without losing children's interest. So we create playgrounds which, to a greater or lesser extent, allow children to take risks in a sheltered environment. Instead of children climbing trees and rooftops or balancing on the tops of fences, they can now climb ladders, frames, and cargo nets, and walk along wooden beams set only a short distance from the ground. Instead of exploring tunnels and caverns, they can now play in concrete pipes and plastic tubes installed on playgrounds. The designed playground allows for some control over the risks a child might otherwise take when left to his or her own devices. Nevertheless, children will invariably test the design of the safest playground. They will take risks which even the best of playground designers could not anticipate. Hence, in order to avoid adversity, it is necessary for us to be present at the activity of children and to stand close by, at least in a supervisory relation to them. Now we can observe children from close quarters. Now we can begin to see what is at stake when we are present on the playground. We can see that risky situations are occasions for interacting with children and for helping them gain confidence in their range of movement. But risky playground situations not only have a bearing on the particular physical activities in which children are engaged, they also influence children's confidence in a world which the playground represents for the moment. The playground, we find, is not such an isolated place after all. This place where risk can become a term of a relation to children allows us to consider how we can help children find their place in a precarious and sometimes all too risky world.

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