



Playing to Learn: Playscapes as sites of pedagogical transformation in Tanzania

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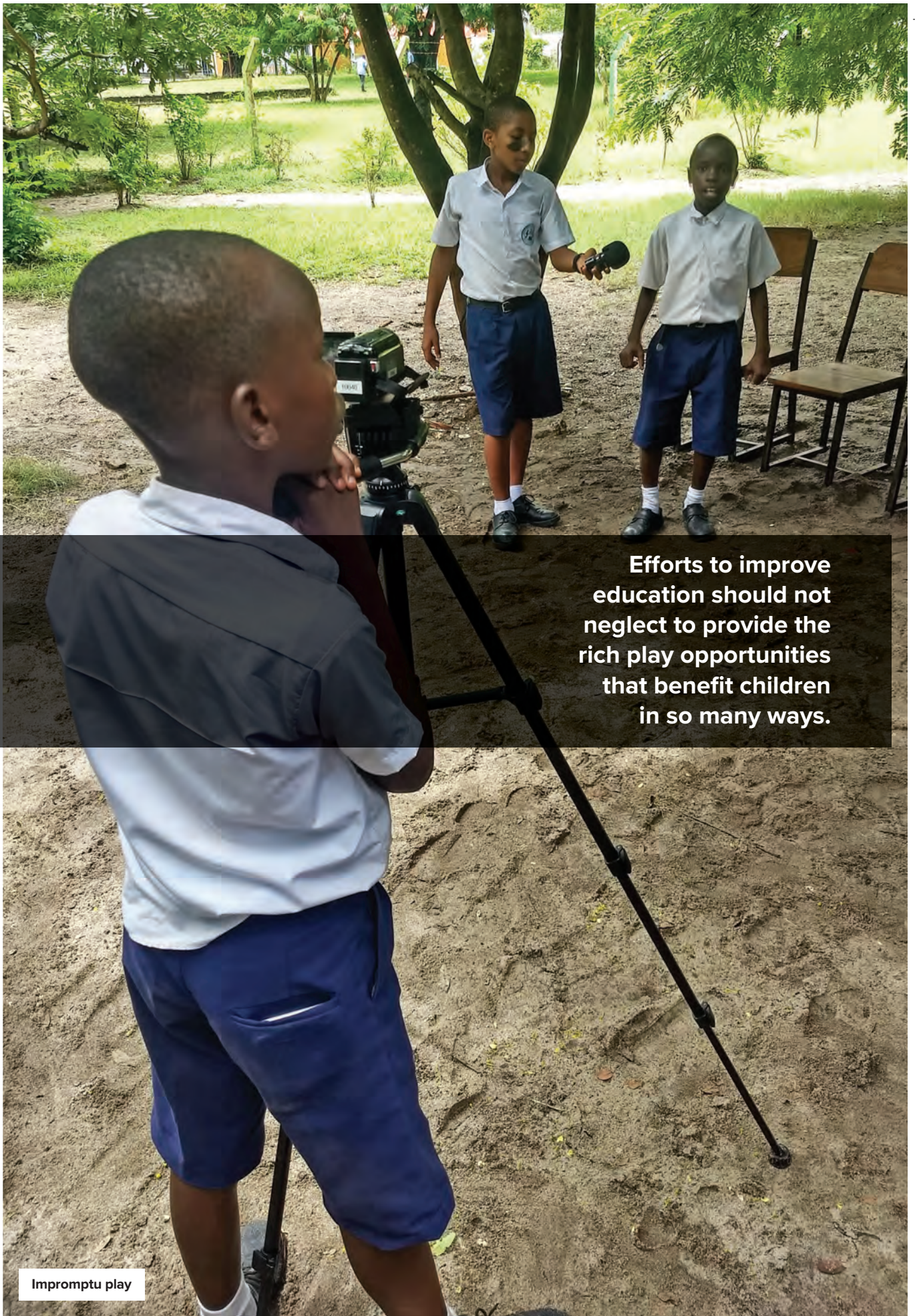
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Efforts to improve education should not neglect to provide the rich play opportunities that benefit children in so many ways.

photos courtesy of author

Impromptu play



Children everywhere play, naturally and spontaneously, and we are increasingly recognizing that opportunities for play in formal education settings can foster children’s creativity, critical thinking, and ability to navigate complex social interactions. Researchers note that: “Playful experiences appear to be a powerful mechanism that help children not only to be happy and healthy in their lives today but also develop the skills to be the creative, engaged, lifelong learners of tomorrow.”¹ In early childhood settings, play-based learning opportunities can help children develop skills and conceptual understandings that form the foundation for later learning.

Playing to Learn:

Playscapes as
sites of pedagogical
transformation in Tanzania

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Playscapes planning workshop



In recognition of the multi-faceted benefits of play, countries around the world have incorporated ideas about play and play-based learning into their educational policy frameworks. In Tanzania, the pre-primary curriculum, for example, guides teachers to use play as the primary method of teaching and learning. Despite this policy mandate for play, however, abundant evidence indicates that Tanzanian children have only limited access to rich play opportunities in their pre-primary and early primary classrooms.² Teachers in Tanzania, even at the pre-primary level, often employ didactic and teacher-centered methods in their classrooms. Children are positioned as passive listeners who spend much of their school day sitting at a desk, copying from the blackboard into an exercise book.

A Vision for Play

The Playing to Learn project seeks to address this gap between policy and practice in Tanzania through an innovative multi-level approach that fosters teachers' ability to enact play-based learning in pre-primary and



A "newscast" about play at DUCE demonstration school

the early grades. The goal of Playing to Learn is to develop a practical and sustainable model for preparing pre-primary and primary school teachers to use play-scapes and play-based learning methods to promote student learning. Central to this project is a low-cost, locally sourced natural playscape. The natural playscape is innovative because, in the context of Tanzania, it represents a new approach to thinking about how and where learning can occur. Moreover, the playscape is a starting point that will seed a broader agenda around play-based learning that is sustainable and aligned with national learning goals in Tanzania.

The Playing to Learn project grew out of a long-standing collaboration between faculty members at Michigan State University (MSU) in the United States and Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, through the Tanzania Partnership Program (TPP). For the past 10 years, TPP has operated as a collaborative alliance of local and international organizations dedicated to improving local livelihoods and promoting community resiliency in Tanzania. TPP has long engaged in teacher professional development at the school level and has experience, as a project, in constructing and developing programming around educational playgrounds. This work highlighted the reality that many Tanzanian teachers lack the knowledge and skills to effectively use play to foster children’s learning.

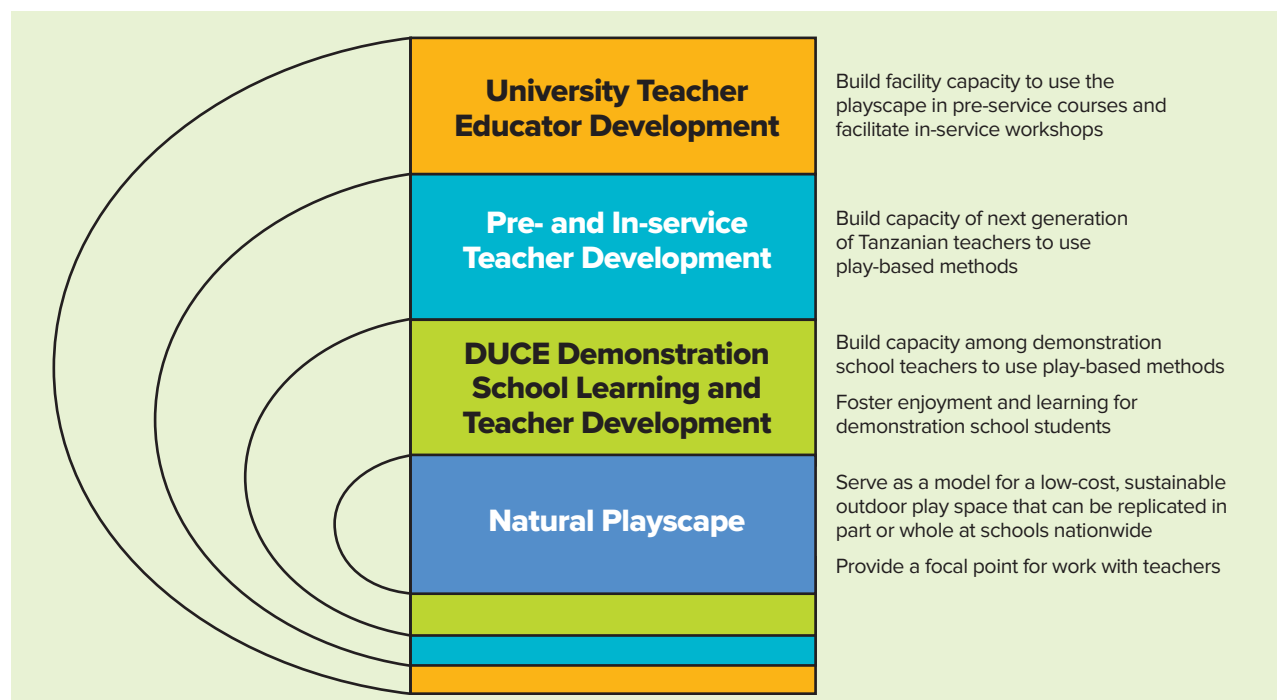
Playing to Learn thus responds to an established pedagogical gap in Tanzania and represents a next step along this trajectory, and a new effort to engage across spheres of influence to affect education change at the systems level.

Designing the Natural Playscape

The centerpiece of this project is a natural outdoor playscape—the first of its kind in Tanzania—on the grounds of DUCE’s demonstration school, which serves students from pre-primary to primary grade 7. The function of this interactive space is threefold. It will serve as: 1) a play and learning space for children who attend the demonstration school; 2) a learning site for DUCE students, who are pre-service pre-primary and primary school teachers; and 3) an in-service professional development site for teachers throughout Tanzania. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the playscape and project activities.

We developed a design for the playscape through a participatory process involving multiple stakeholder groups representing the lab school, DUCE students and faculty, community members, and representatives

Figure 1 Nested activities related to natural playscape.





Initial playscape design

from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although this process has been temporarily slowed due to the COVID-19 crisis, the work we were able to undertake prior to the onset of the global pandemic demonstrates the promise of our approach and underscores our commitment to including a range of voices in the planning process.

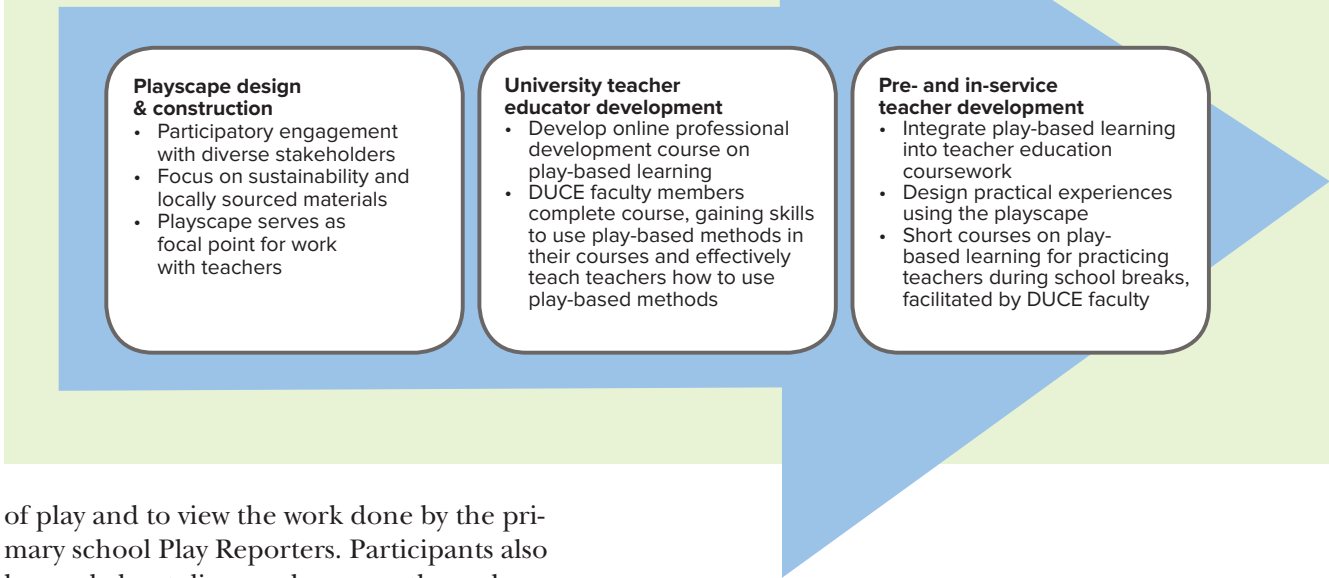
In January 2020, the authors facilitated a series of activities and workshops in Dar es Salaam designed to generate stakeholders' perspectives on the playscape design. We began with head teachers and teachers at the lab school, meeting with them to describe the goals of our project and hear their input about existing challenges to implementing play-based learning. Next, we engaged primary school students in play-reporting activities with the goal of centering children's voices and perspectives in the playscape design. Over the course of several hours during a school day, 10 children in grades

6 and 7 took on the role of "Play Reporters," an activity designed to ascertain their views about play opportunities/practices at their school. We first facilitated a series of ice-breaker and introductory activities to help the Play Reporters understand who we were, what we were doing, and what we were asking them to do. Then, our Play Reporters set out to gather their data by informally interviewing their classmates and observing them at play. Next, Play Reporters worked in small groups to create a series of reports titled "Play at Our School." Two groups created newsletters and two groups created a news report and then presented their work to the authors and each other.

One of the most significant findings from the play-reporting activity is the central role of music, dance, and performance in Tanzanian children's play. As the Play Reporters were preparing their presentations, they engaged in spontaneous and impromptu play that involved singing, dancing, and enacting stories. This sustained, joyful, and child-led play gave us unique insight into the types of play experiences that might be meaningful to Tanzanian children, and led to the inclusion of a music/performance area in the playscapes design draft.

After hearing from primary school children about their play, we then facilitated a daylong Playscapes Planning Workshop that involved a range of stakeholders, including DUCE faculty members, NGO officials, and pre-primary teachers. The workshop began with an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own childhood memories

Figure 2 Overview of Playing to Learn project activities.



of play and to view the work done by the primary school Play Reporters. Participants also learned about diverse playscapes through presentations, video, and discussions, and then worked in small groups to develop a playscape design. We asked participants to consider their memories, the children’s recommendations, and a range of elements/features (e.g., sand, water, art, music, loose parts, installations) as they developed their designs. We analyzed these designs along with the perspectives gathered from primary school students to develop a draft design of the playscape.

The next step in developing and building the playscape will involve collaboration between Tanzanian and U.S. landscape architects and engineers to finalize the playscape design and create building plans. The building plans will prioritize the use of locally available and low-cost building materials. We will document the construction process and develop a design book so the playscape, or elements of the playscape, can be constructed in other settings.

Supporting Learning on the Playscape and Beyond

The natural playscape has intrinsic value for students at the DUCE demonstration school, who will undoubtedly benefit from a play space developed with them in mind. However, we do not want to stop there (see Figure 2). Through the Playing to Learn project, we seek to affect systems-level change by harnessing the potential of DUCE, a premier

teacher preparation institution, to develop and enact a new model of pedagogical transformation that can reshape teacher preparation and practice throughout Tanzania. DUCE faculty members will play a key role in realizing this vision through their work with pre- and in-service teachers. Once the playscape is constructed, DUCE faculty members will use it to foster pre-service teachers’ understanding of and ability to enact play-based learning with pre-primary and primary school students. The playscape will be a site where pre-service teachers can engage in micro-teaching and other activities that will enhance their future practice as teachers. As such, the DUCE playscape and associated programming can serve as a model for structural change in pre-service teacher preparation in Tanzania. DUCE faculty will also facilitate professional development workshops on play-based learning for practicing teachers, using the natural playscape as a centerpiece of this work.

A needs assessment administered to 12 DUCE faculty members pointed to a need for capacity-building among DUCE faculty to support the goals of this project. Most of the respondents (83.4%) indicated that they were either “unfamiliar” or “somewhat familiar” with theories of play-based learning. Only about 42% of respondents stated that they were very comfortable implementing active learning strategies in their course. The perceived need for professional development and its demand from the faculty was confirmed by the finding that all 12 respondents expressed that they were “very interested” in learning more about how play can be used to teach math, reading, and science.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this need would have been addressed with an on-site training workshop

for faculty members. Instead, restrictions to travel and in-person gatherings created an opportunity for innovation. MSU and DUCE faculty and graduate students are now developing an online professional development workshop on play-based learning for teacher educators. The goal of this course, which will be piloted with a small group of DUCE faculty in February 2021, is threefold: 1) to deepen teacher educators' understanding of play and play-based learning, 2) to build teacher educators' capacity to use play-based learning strategies in their pedagogy courses with pre-service teachers, and 3) to enhance teacher educators' capacity to teach pre- and in-service teachers how to enact play-based methods in their own classrooms.

A key consideration in the development of this course is the poor internet infrastructure in Tanzania. In our needs assessment survey, two-thirds of respondents pointed to lack of reliable internet at work as a major obstacle to completing the course, and all respondents cited slow internet and unreliable internet connectivity as either a major or a minor challenge. We are designing our online course with these challenges in mind, so that we can ensure the course will be accessible to teacher educators in low-resource settings.



Preparing Play Reporters for research activities

Looking Ahead

International development organizations and NGOs are currently implementing a range of programs in Tanzania and similar settings that are aimed at supporting play-based learning. Most of these interventions are directed at practicing teachers. Our university-based collaborative project takes a different, yet complementary, approach—one we believe has the potential to foster systems-level change in Tanzania. Our theory of change begins with a playscape—an inviting, authentic, natural space that will inspire joyful play for children at the DUCE demonstration school. This playscape will serve as a laboratory for testing culturally relevant approaches to play-based learning through pre- and in-service teacher development. DUCE faculty professional development, facilitated through an innovative online course, will be essential to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the Playing to Learn project. It is our hope that by working across system levels, with teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and practicing teachers, this project can have a positive and lasting effect on teachers' practice in Tanzania.

The Playing to Learn project is an adventure that continues to unfold. We have already experienced unanticipated complications due to the pandemic, and we expect that the process of designing, building, and working with faculty, students, and teachers will continue to be an iterative one, informed by on-the-ground realities and input from multiple stakeholder groups. We embrace this lack of certainty with the knowledge that our ability to design and implement an effective and sustainable project is dependent upon engagement with a range of people and perspectives.

Notes:

¹ Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2018). Accessing the inaccessible: Redefining play as a spectrum. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(AUG), 1-12. p. 6.

² Kejo, S. M. (2017). *Exploring play in early years education: Beliefs and practices of pre-primary educators in Tanzania*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria.

Eco-Playgrounds

Hawaii

A playground at the Anaina Hou Community Park in Kilauea on the Hawaiian island of Kauai is a model of sustainability and cultural responsiveness. The eco-playground, a project of Hawaii Volcanic Water, is built almost entirely from recycled plastic and locally sourced non-toxic natural building materials.

As visitors explore the playground, they can be immersed in the history of the Hawaiian Islands. At the center of the playground, a climbing structure evokes the volcanoes that formed the islands. The playground also offers users the chance to imagine navigating the Pacific Ocean with the stars as their guide, like the original Polynesian settlers did on a double-hulled Hawaiian ocean sailing canoe. In addition, there is an extensive multi-level ahupua'a (mountain-to-ocean land area) themed structure and sugarcane era trains.



London

The Ashburnham School Playground in London combines sustainable design with holistic learning. Developed through a partnership of Foster + Partners, The Bryan Adams Foundation, and playground designers Made From Scratch, the playground offers urban children an opportunity to experience a variety of natural environments.

The mix of hard and soft natural surfaces emphasizes multi-sensory stimulation. The landscaping, selected to counteract air and noise pollution, is low maintenance while providing seasonal variety.

A treehouse is built into the school's largest tree, and the main climbing structure reflects a dense jungle landscape with its tangle of logs, balance beams, rope bridges, nets, and green climbing vines. A beach sandpit is flanked by boulders and untreated timber, custom-built steel and timber troughs hold collected rainwater, and a nest swing can be found in a bamboo grove.



Inclusive Playgrounds

Seven principles of inclusive playground design are:

- **Be fair.** Play environments are designed to allow everyone to participate equally.
- **Be included.** Everyone is included, regardless of diverse abilities.
- **Be smart.** The play environment is easy to understand.
- **Be independent.** All children can play independently and at their own level.
- **Be safe.** Playgrounds meet current safety standards, while remaining challenging.
- **Be active.** The environment supports physical activities.
- **Be comfortable.** The playground is usable for people with all needs, including sensory, size, and mobility needs.



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