
The Hidden & Informal Curriculum

Activity Overview

Students investigate their school grounds, create photos of those design elements they prefer and do not prefer, and write a short paragraph describing how they feel about the area.

Objectives

Students will:

- Document their school ground preferences with photographs
- Design visual presentations of their personal school ground design preferences
- Create writing samples describing their preferences

Subjects Covered

Language Arts, Social Studies, and Art

Grades

K through 12

Activity Time

1 hour

Season

Any

Materials

Clipboards, pens, pencils, camera, posterboard

State Standards

Language Arts:

Create or produce writing (B.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Plan, revise, edit, & publish writing (B.4.2, 8.2, 12.2)

Understand forms, structures, & punctuation marks (B.4.3, 8.3, 12.3)

Create or produce writing (B.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Plan, revise, edit, & publish writing (B.4.2, 8.2, 12.2)

Understand forms, structures, & punctuation marks (B.4.3, 8.3, 12.3)

Create or produce writing (B.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Background

The “hidden curriculum” of school grounds influences how children think, act, and feel at school. Wendy Titman wrote in her 1994 book *Special places, special people: The hidden curriculum of school grounds* that children read the elements of school grounds as signifiers of a school’s culture. Schoolyards convey a complex web of unstated but assumed messages and meanings that affect students’ behaviors and influence how schools operate as well.

For many children, school grounds are their primary experience with the outdoors. Most schools require children to go outside for certain parts of the day, either for physical education, recess, or lunch breaks. During these times, children are in an environment unlike most other school environments, where they are with other children of varied ages and sizes in a space that is primarily theirs.

Titman’s research, sponsored by Learning Through Landscapes (United Kingdom), found that children prefer schoolyards that simultaneously provide a place for doing, thinking, feeling, and being. If a schoolyard fulfills some of their needs, students perceive that the school values their well-being. School grounds that do not meet students’ needs cause a perception that the school doesn’t care about their well-being.

The environmental design of schoolyards can help fulfill students’ physical, emotional, and cognitive needs through the incorporation of the following elements:

- Animals, ponds, and other living things
- Natural color, diversity, and change
- Surfaces that don’t hurt
- Places for sitting or leaning, where students can find shelter and shade; a landscape that provides different levels, nooks, and crannies; spots to make dens or find structures and materials that can be changed, either actually or through the imagination.

The presence of such natural elements enhance how children feel about the intentions of school administrations in terms of what children should or should not do on their school grounds.

Activity Description

Suppose students could have a schoolyard environment that perfectly fulfills their needs. Take some time to ask your students how that would look and how it would make them feel. (This could also be handled by having students interview each other to answer the questions.)

The Hidden & Informal Curriculum (cont.)

Plan, revise, edit, & publish writing (B.4.2, 8.2, 12.2)

Understand forms, structures, & punctuation marks (B.4.3, 8.3, 12.3)

Use computers (E.4.1, 8.1, 12.1)

Social Studies:

Describe examples of land use, communities, shelters (A.4.4)

Describe buildings and cultural values (A.8.9)

Analyze cultural factors that influence design of places (A.12.9)

Assess land use policies (A.12.12)

Explain rules of behavior (C.4.3)

Locate, organize & use information to understand an issue (C.4.6)

Locate, organize & use information to understand an issue (C.8.7)

Use information to understand & communicate about an issue (C.12.8)

Explain influence of factors on identity and development (E.4.2)

Describe influence of ethnic cultures (E.4.4)

Describe contributions of institutions (E.4.5)

Explain how different responses & interactions influence behavior (E.4.7)

Investigate cultural similarities & differences (E.4.13)

Describe contributions to social continuity & change (E.8.4)

Describe how groups & institutions meet needs (E.8.5)

Analyze institutions' role in social continuity & change (E.12.4)

Analyze influence of groups and institutions (E.12.6)

Go outside with a camera, and have each student take one picture of a favorite part of the schoolyard and another of a least favored area. When everyone has taken their pictures, put the two pictures together on a poster, and have the students describe how their schoolyard makes them feel. The photos could also be combined to create a Web page or other computer-generated display.

Summarize how the students feel about their school grounds in one paragraph, or have each student write a short paragraph to describe personal feelings about the schoolyard.

Extensions

- Students discuss how they think the school's teachers and administrators feel about the school grounds.
- Write a simple question or two that students can ask teachers, custodians, and parents to find out how they feel about the school ground.
- What parts of the schoolyard do adults think are attractive or special?
- How do their responses compare with how your class feels about the schoolyard?
- Create a class photo album to document students' school ground preferences and the changes made as your restoration site takes shape.
- Using pictures from magazines or by drawing pictures, have students show what they would like your school ground to look like.

Additional Resources

- Hillman, M., Adams, J., and Whitelegg, J. (1990). *One false move: A study of children's independent mobility*. London, UK: The Policy Studies Institute.
- Kaplan, S. and Kaplan, R. (1982). Humanscape: Environments for people. In S. Kaplan and R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Proceedings of our nation's landscape*, (pp. 54-58). Duxbury Press.
- Nabhan, G. P. and Trimble, S. (1994). *Geography of childhood: Why children need wild places*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Titman, W. (1994). *Special places, special people: The hidden curriculum of school grounds*. Surrey, UK: World Wide Fund for Nature United Kingdom.

Assessments

- Student posters or visuals can be components of a student portfolio
- Students can write short essays describing how their school ground makes them feel.
- Students can make presentations of their individual and/or collective school ground preferences, as well as proposed changes to the design
- Conduct peer reviews of these reports.