The Work Of Play  
The Early Years of the Professionalization of Playground and Recreation Workers in the Progressive Era (1906-1914)  
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Introduction

Abstract

Playground workers became a central focus in efforts to increase access to play for the expanding and increasingly diverse urban populations of the early 1900’s. The recognition of the need for more opportunities for recreation led to acceptance of the playground movement as an important social reform, putting into motion a series of actions relying the professionalism of the playground worker. This historical analysis looks at the particulars of these professionalizing activities which included the development of a professional organization, a body of knowledge, avenues for disseminating expertise through training programs, and work towards the goal of social betterment.

Methods

Data Collection

Historical Period: 1906-1914

This time frame begins with the creation of the PAA in 1906. The beginning of World War I in 1914 halted or shifted the focus of many initiatives, including the playground movement, and serves as the end point for this analysis.

Archival Sources

The National Recreation Association Records in the Social Work History Archives (SWHA) at the University of Minnesota (UMN)
- PAA papers
- Issues of the ‘Playground’ journal
- PAA Congress Proceedings
- PAA Normal Course on Play curriculum

National Federation of Settlements at the SWHA, UMN
- Nova Boyd Papers
  (Boyd was an early playground leader, social worker, sociologist, and founder of the Chicago School for Playground Workers (CSPW), likely the first school for playground workers)

Richard Dakey Library, Special Collections and Archives at the University of Illinois, Chicago
- Nova Boyd Papers

Secondary Sources

- Historical accounts of the playground movement—early 1900’s to present
- Philosophical and sociological writings on the development of professions 1800’s through the early 1900’s

Findings

Findings are divided into four subsections with each subsection corresponding to a specific component which characterizes occupations moving in the direction of professionalization (Finkler 1995/2001).

Areas of Professionalization

Professional Association
- The purpose of this Association shall be to promote normal, wholesome play and public recreation.
- Constitution of the Playground and Recreation Association of America (Kitty, 2011)

As the only organization focused specifically on the playground movement, the PAA acted as the driving force in professionalizing the playground worker.

Body of Knowledge
- PAA developed the ‘The Normal Course in Play’ in 1910
  - Marketed to Normal Schools (today’s universities/colleges)
  - Designed by PAA to become implemented in Normal School curriculums
- The Playground
  - PAA’s journal provided activities, resources, updates on the field, and job opportunities
- Training Programs
  - Training Institutes
  - Invited lectures
  - Demonstrations at annual or regional meetings
  - Chicago School for Playground Workers (CSPW)

These methods sought to provide specialized knowledge to individuals working in recreation and playground settings in places including schools, settlement houses, and communities.

Social BETTERMENT

The focus of the professions on social betterment was a characteristic of the developing playground worker profession.

“(The PAA) views with deep concern the loss of initiative in play of the children of the nation in large cities and small, and in the country, and therefore affirms the necessity not only of providing place and space, but equipment, and more especially, direction for play” (National Recreation Association, n.d., p.8)

The PAA often appealed to current thoughts about social improvement, by aligning its work with American values and child development.

Discussion

Three Key Areas

Association prior to body of knowledge

The ‘known’ professions typically develop a body of knowledge within the academy before forming a professional organization.

Laissez faire approach to body of knowledge

Though the PAA developed a curriculum, they did not control its implementation and instead insisted on significant leverage and oversight by the normal schools. This may have been influenced by the deviation from the typical pattern of development followed by the ‘known’ professions.

Bi-direction influence of the Social Work and Play Movement

Professionalizing efforts were relatively new in both fields and their close association may have helped, and in some cases, hindered the progress of each movement towards professionalization.

Findings from this historical research provide an understanding of the beginnings of today’s Parks and Recreation Association and shed light on what efforts were made to professionalize the occupation of individuals working in recreation environments. Further research may look deeper at how the two movements of social work and the playground have aided or impeded each other’s progress towards professionalization over time.

References

Factors in the social, political, and ideological environment came together in the early decades of the 1900’s to formalize the work of play. The first formal association, the Playground Association of America (PAA), was founded in 1906 as a growing concern over a lack of play, especially among youth, developed. Factors including increased urbanization, changing immigration patterns, shifts in knowledge in the science of child development, changing gender roles, and social reform, converged to create a heightened interest in play and recreation at the beginning of the 1900’s (Rainwater, 1952).

This time period also gave rise to the pursuit of professionalization among various occupational realms, including social work. The work of playground and settlement leaders often overlapped during the pursuit of professional status in both fields. This historical context was used to frame the professionalizing activities of the playground movement in the early twentieth century.