Designing Play Spaces With Young Student Voice

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OTAC Annual Conference - Session 111
Pasadena, CA

Sunday, November 8, 2026
11:45-12:45pm PST



Session Materials



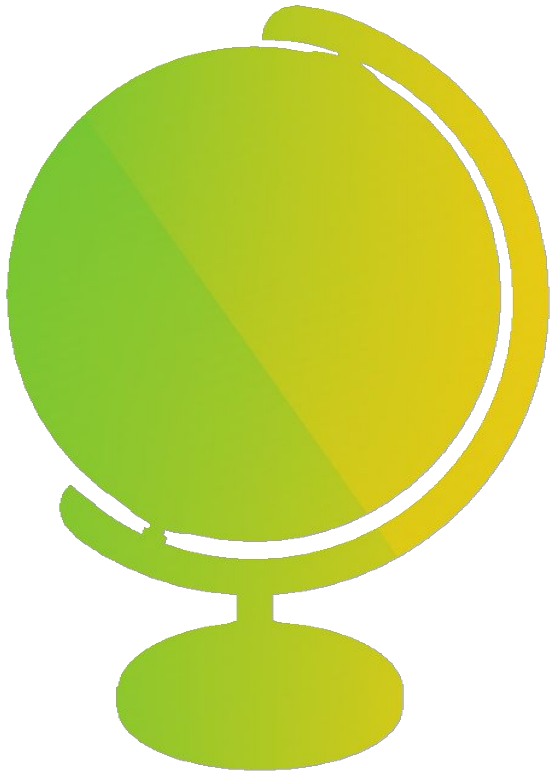
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Learning Objectives

Learning Objective #1: Participants will be able to describe the **role of occupational therapy** in promoting participation and inclusion through student-informed play space design in school settings.

Learning Objective #2: Participants will be able to identify at least **three** developmentally appropriate methods for **gathering meaningful input** from elementary-aged students about their play experiences and preferences.

Learning Objective 3: Participants will be able to apply student voice data to generate at least **two practical, participation-focused recommendations** for creating more inclusive and engaging school play environments.



MeniMeter Poll

When you hear “play” and “school-based OT,” what is the first word or phrase that comes to mind?

Agenda

1. Occupational Therapy's Role in Play and Inclusion
2. History of UCLA Lab School
3. Case Study: Room 15 Student Input
4. Current Impact
5. Notable Takeaways

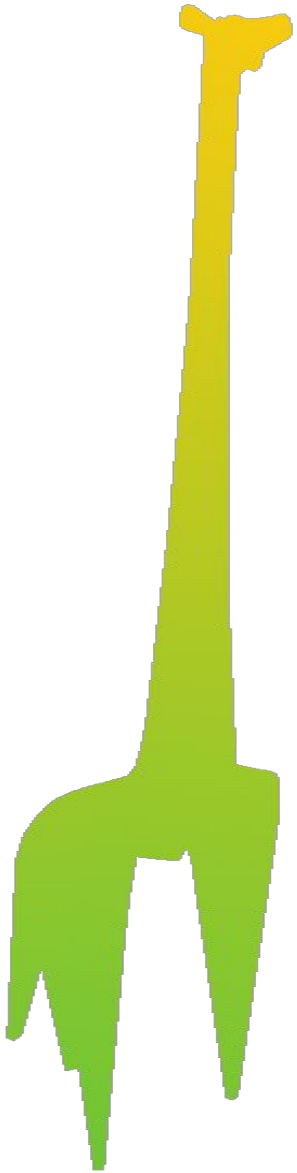






Occupational Therapy's Role in Play and Inclusion in Schools

- According to AOTA, play is an essential occupation and is paramount for development and learning (AOTA, 2020)
- In school settings, access to inclusive and engaging play environments can influence students' participation across the day (Grady-Dominguez, 2021)
- Play spaces, if in existence, are often designed by adults who lack awareness and training
- Occupational therapy practitioners are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap

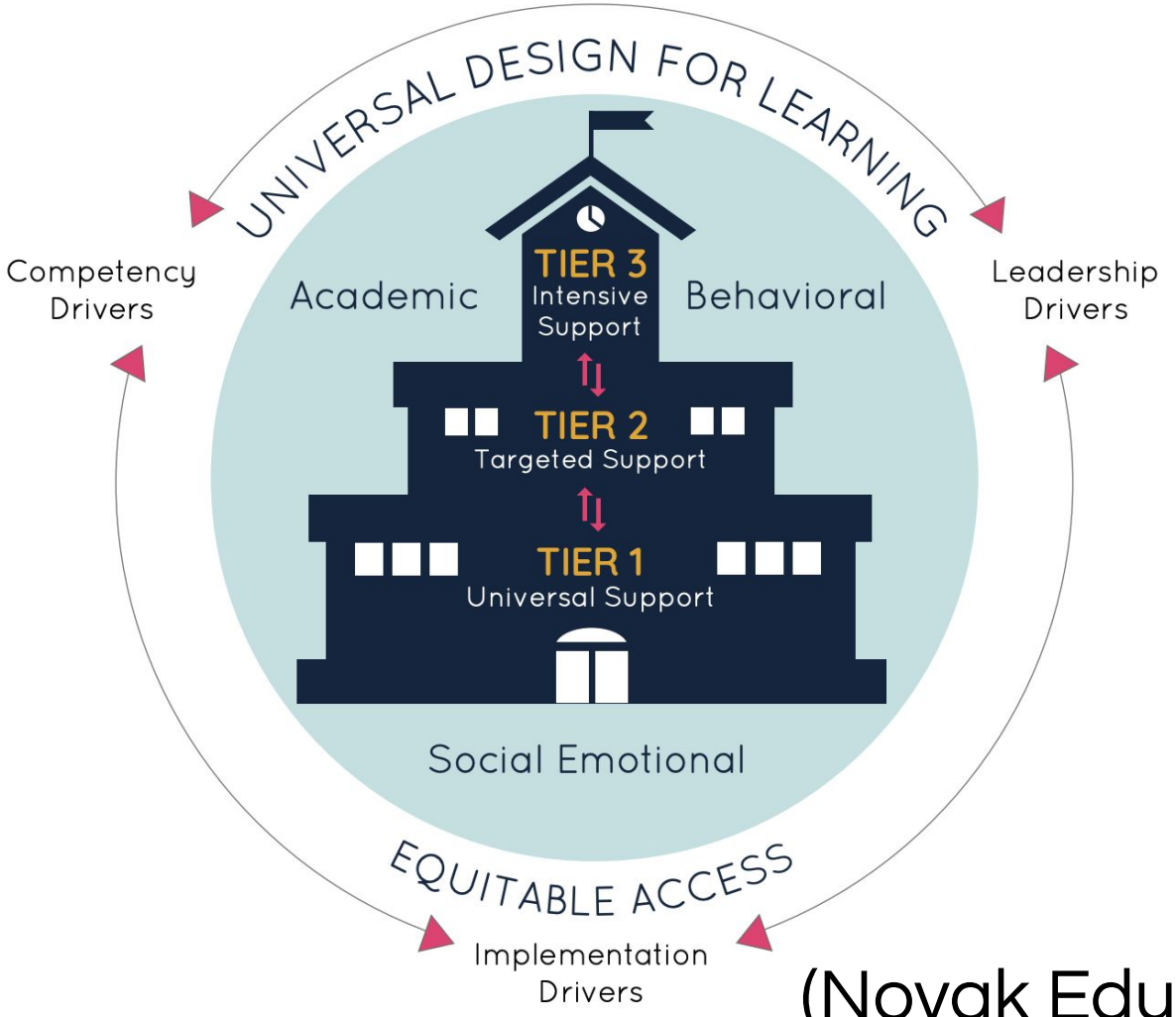


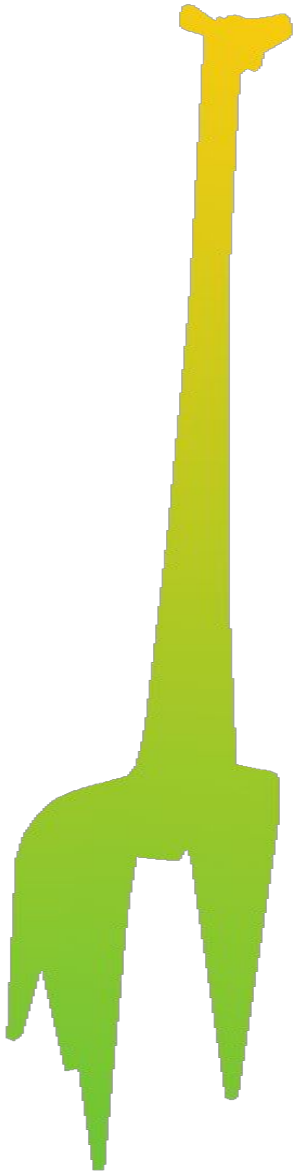
Creativity Matters!

- Incorporating student voice can strengthen the design of play spaces by ensuring they reflect authentic interests, sensory needs, social participation opportunities, and accessibility considerations (Raymond-Tolan, 2025; Kuhaneck, 2024)



This Fits the MTSS Education Model!





(Novak Education, 2023)

History of UCLA Lab School







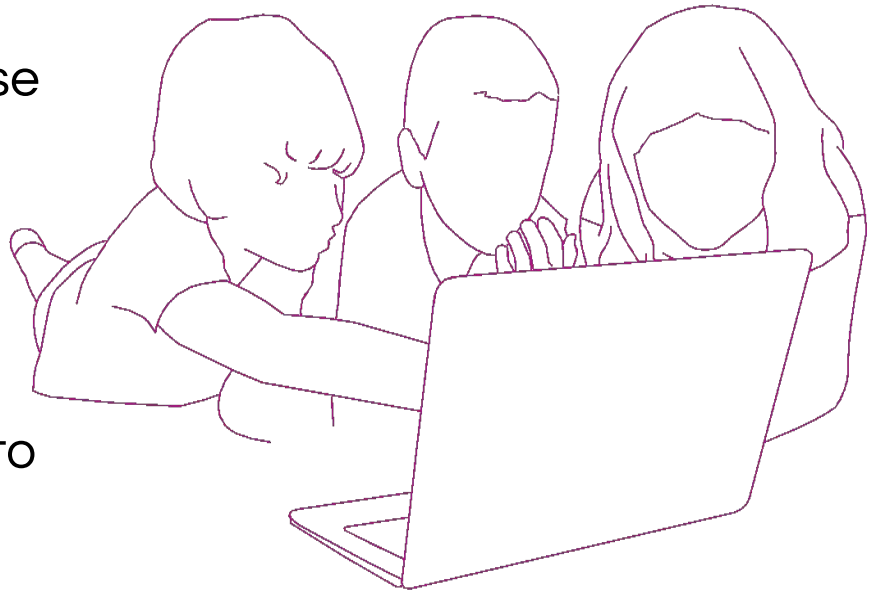




UCLA Lab School Today

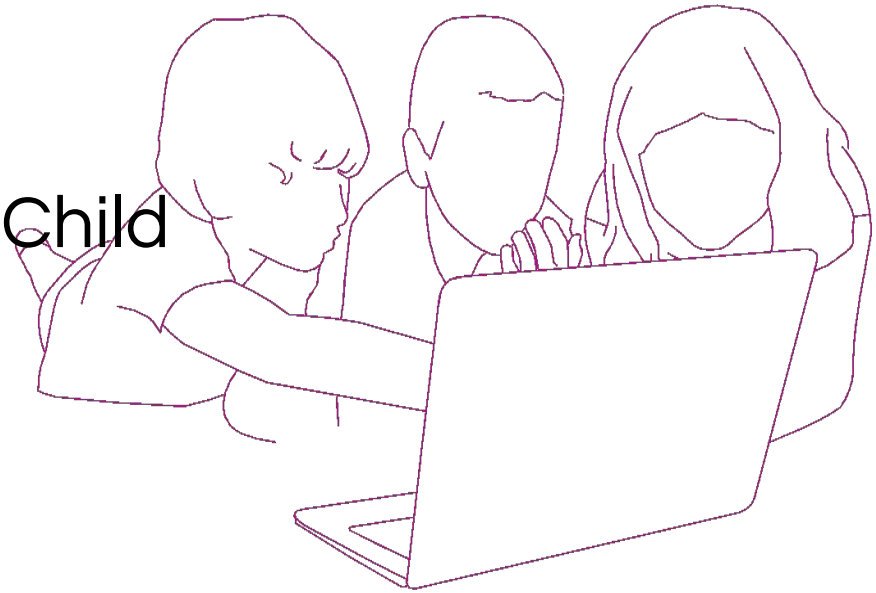
As a laboratory for the UCLA School of Education & Information Studies, our mission at UCLA Lab School is to promote innovation and excellence in education through teaching, research and public engagement.

- We are dedicated to addressing the needs of children from diverse backgrounds.
- We value teaching and learning environments that honor each child's natural joy of learning.
- We encourage creativity and support a disciplined approach to intellectual inquiry.
- We are a caring community of learners — students, teachers, staff, and families.
- We are committed to educating the whole child



UCLA Lab School Today

- Approaches: inquiry, nature-based, digital design learning, dual language
- Inclusion Program
- Supporting the Whole Child

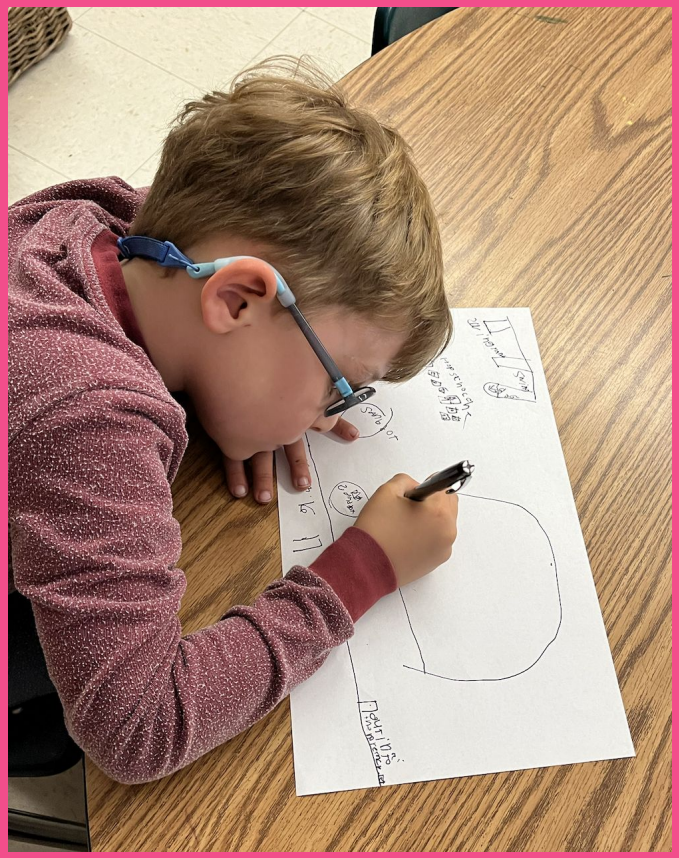




Case Study: Room 15 Student Input into Play Yard Design



Whole Class



Individual

Case Study: Room 15 Student Input into Play Yard Design





Small Group Collaboration



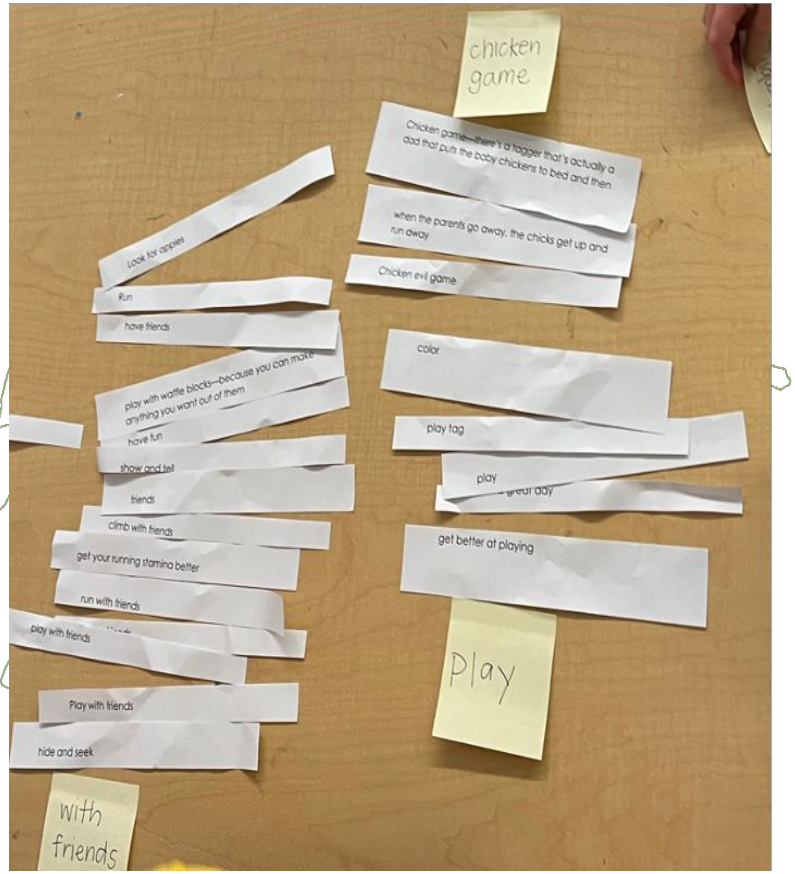
Small Group Showcases

Turn and Talk

- What other methods would you have used to gather input?
- Do you think teachers at your school would be on board with this?
- If you are not at a school, what are ways you can get community input?

Play Themes Students Suggested

- **Gross Motor** : Zip line, grass, ball pit, trampoline, new structures (climbing wall), “crashing safely”
- **Social** : “space for friends”, sport areas (scoreboard), Ladybug pond, Chicken Game, sitting areas to watch
- **Art**: place for art and generating creative ideas



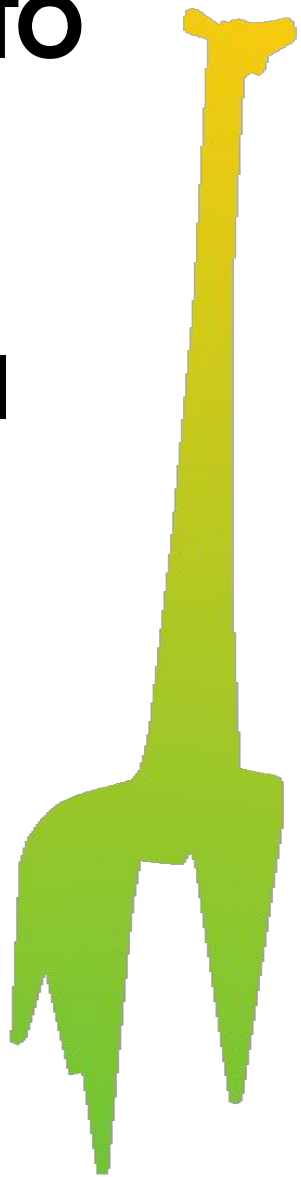
Turn and Talk

- What did you guess students would have said?
- What themes surprised you?

Presenting Student Input to School Administrators

Interdisciplinary Approach

- Set up a meeting with Principal and Assistant Principal in off season
- Escalated idea to Office of Giving
- Generous Donation via Spring 2025 Day of Giving
  - put as subject line

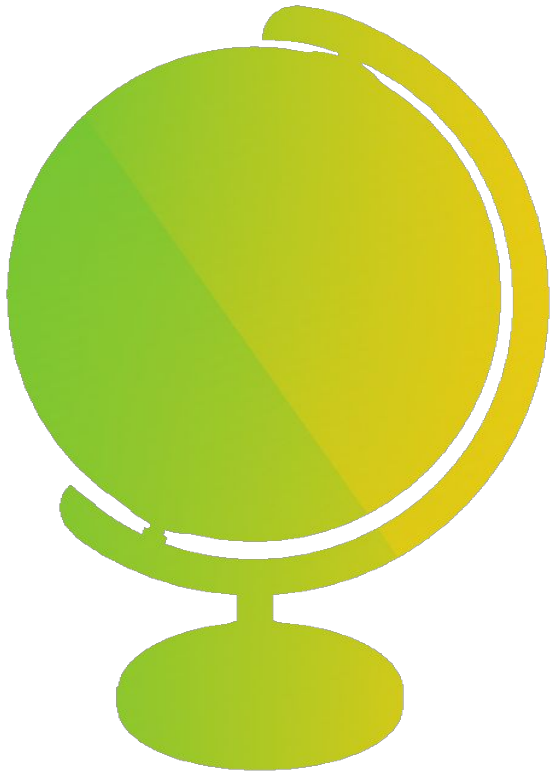


Above all, PATIENCE, GRATITUDE, AND TIME!

Presenting Student Input to School Administrators

Interdisciplinary - Many Minds!

- Set up a meeting with Principal and Assistant Principal in off season - Summer 2024
- Escalated idea to Office of Giving who collaborated with Family School Alliance
- Generous Donation via Fall 2025 Day of Giving
    - put as subject line
- New Structure arrived Spring 2026



Above all, PATIENCE, GRATITUDE, AND TIME!

Today's Evolving Play Yard







MeniMeter Poll

What do you think you'll try soon in your setting as a result of this session?

bitly

Thank You!



What questions do you have for me?
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References

https://bit.ly/otac2026playref



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