Statement of Grant Purpose

MA by Research, Leeds University: Adventure Playgrounds: Discourse and Policy Evolution

I propose to contribute to the geographic understanding of adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom. While there is an existing academic literature on the adventure play movement and a growing body of work documenting the positive value of autonomous play—child-directed free play—, there is little published research that specifically examines the larger implications of the evolving meaning of the popular term “adventure playground” in institutional settings. By exploring the evolution of what are called “adventure playgrounds” in the United Kingdom—a leader in the institutional fostering of play—this research will illuminate contemporary global issues concerning child development and access to autonomous play in urban public space, and contribute to the public policy discourse regarding play infrastructure design. A better understanding of the public policy structures that engender publically-accessible spaces of autonomous play in the United Kingdom will strengthen my ability to actively contribute to a culture of institutional support for such spaces in the United States.

Geography is a field of study that forms an interdisciplinary nexus of social science research concerned with various aspects of space and place. Social and cultural geography is positioned to provide an intellectual framework for the examination of questions about the interaction of policy and infrastructure at multiple scales, and the ways in which people experience and contest the lived effects of these interactions. As an undergraduate, I have taken classes in the diverse fields of child-development, education, landscape architecture, economics, political science, and sociology. My major concentration in Geography and Urban Studies combined approaches from these fields and helped me to form a more comprehensive understanding of spaces of children’s play, the particular global and local political economies of publically-accessible playgrounds, and their social influences and outcomes.

The MA by Research in Geography at the University of Leeds will enable me to further my understanding of spaces of children’s play. I am particularly interested in this program for the opportunity it affords to conduct research under the guidance of Dr. who has offered to serve as my faculty mentor (see attached affiliation letter). Dr. has insight into critical approaches to children’s geographies will strengthen the theoretical aspect of my research. Working closely with Dr. and other Leeds Geography faculty will provide me with an excellent foundation upon which to undertake doctoral research, furthering my long-term goal of building a career focused around children’s environments.

The opportunity to study in the United Kingdom will allow me to focus my research on the institutional fostering of autonomous play spaces. By “autonomous play” I mean the ability to interact with materials in a meaningful way, and to freely augment the structure of the existing environment. In contrast to the United States, the United Kingdom has a longstanding institutional culture that explicitly values child-directed free play, rooted in the championing of “junk,” odds-and-ends, or “adventure” playgrounds by Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect and play theorist. Commitment to the provision of autonomous play has been demonstrated by several research initiatives, including the national Play Strategy endorsed by the Department for Children, Schools, and Family, as well as projects sponsored by the Forestry Commission England and the research and policy non-profits Play England and London Play.

At the University of Leeds, I propose to undertake research that examines the evolving institutional definitions of “adventure playground” and the effect of these changing definitions
on the provision of publicly-accessible spaces of autonomous play. This research will be the basis for a 30,000-word dissertation. My research will address three main questions: (1) In what ways has the term adventure playground been defined historically in the United Kingdom?; (2) How is this term currently used in institutional and academic literature in the United Kingdom?; and (3) How has this evolution of meaning shaped the institutional fomentation of autonomous or divergent play? In order to answer these questions, I will (1) review and construct a content analysis of relevant historical and contemporary literature from academic, governmental, and non-governmental organization (NGO) sources, (2) conduct ethnographic interviews with policy makers, adventure play workers, and users of adventure play spaces, and (3) photographically document existing adventure play spaces. My archival research and access to pertinent sources will be supported by Play England (see attached affiliation letter), a research and advocacy organization that is a subsidiary of the National Children’s Bureau (NCB), which houses the Donne Buck Archive, the International Play Association Archive, the Lady Allen of Hurtwood Archive, and the Children’s Play Information Service. In addition to the research support that affiliation with the NCB will provide—through Play England—conducting this research will enable me to develop lasting research relationships. I will also seek to expand my understanding of adventure playgrounds as spaces of autonomous play by volunteering at Glamis Adventure Playground in London and spaces of autonomous play closer to Leeds—which Dr. has offered to help me to connect with. Through volunteering at autonomous play spaces I will seek to identify and recruit play workers and participants for ethnographic interviews, which will enable my research to be inclusive of the lived experience of such spaces.

In accordance with Dr. ’s advice, I will stay in London for a week upon arrival in the United Kingdom in early September in order to become acquainted with the resources available through Play England. Then, after spending some time working directly with Dr. to establish the details of my methodology, I will return to London for extended periods as needed. The majority of the spring and summer will be spent analyzing my findings and writing the dissertation under Dr. ’s close supervision.

I am confident of my ability to conduct this research, based on my successful experience conducting independent research in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Over two periods totaling four months, I conducted field research centered on the changing political economy of publicly-accessible playgrounds in BiH. The field research for that project utilized a mixed-methodology of observation, photography, semi-structured interviews, and public document analysis. I received a competitive grant and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and successfully obtained and supervised two translators. The research skills that I gained through my fieldwork in BiH were strengthened by my senior research project, in which I explored the social and political-economic implications of the contemporary parks policy of the municipal government of Philadelphia, PA, a geographic information systems (GIS) project, in which I have spatially analyzed the socio-economic correlates of that policy, and a study of the socio-spatial effects of mentoring for university students in STEM fields funded by the National Science Foundation.

In addition to studying, I hope to take part in the outdoor opportunities that the United Kingdom affords. I will join the Leeds Ramblers, a group with over 800 local members that organizes collective walks through urban areas and the surrounding countryside. Through membership and participation in the Ramblers, I will indulge my love of hiking while forming friendships beyond the University community. Extended walks provide an ideal opportunity for broadening my ties to the host community through in-depth conversations.